

RADICAL TURNS FROM GRAMSCI TO NEGRI. LIFE, BIOPOLITICS AND
SOCIAL CHANGE IN ITALY

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In this work I investigate the concept of biopolitics as it emerges in the particular historical setting of twentieth and twenty-first Century Italy. Framing biopolitics as the foregrounding of labor-power, i.e. of the potential to produce, I define three historical moments in which this notion is articulated and gives rise to new social practices in Italy: the 1920 Factory Councils Movement and the philosophy of praxis of Antonio Gramsci, the student Movement of 1968 in its dialogue with Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Marxist neo-feminist discourse on reproduction carried out by *Lotta Femminista*, and finally the thought of Antonio Negri and its notion of the multitude in the context of the Anti-Globalization Movement. Each of these turning points stages a biopolitical struggle of a determinate subjectivity against the mode of production in power: the workers of the Factory Councils faced the introduction of Fordism; 1968 and Marxist neo-feminism that of Fordism in its advanced phase of automation of production; the multitude of the Anti-Globalization Movement that of post-Fordism with its emphasis on immaterial production. If the biopolitical is today the substratum of our mode of production, from the perspective of Italian political thought, my genealogical reconstruction aims at clarifying the degree of oppression and the contradictions of the biopolitical at a global level.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Andrea Righi was born in Correggio (Reggio Emilia) in the northeastern part of Italy in 1974. In high school he studied humanities and participated to the AFS exchange program spending an academic year in Upper State New York. Later he graduated in Philosophy with a concentration in Aesthetics at the University of Bologna. The topic of his dissertation was the late poetry of Wallace Stevens and its critical reception. After studying Spanish in Madrid, he entered a graduate program in Comparative Literature still at the University of Bologna. In 2004, as a Fulbrighter, he received a M.A. in Literatures in English from the University of California, San Diego. In this period his work focused on post-68 North American and Spanish poetic avant-gardes. After returning to Bologna to receive his degree, he spent four intense and rewarding years at Cornell where his interests shifted from poetry to Italian political thought and biopolitics.

To Claudio Righi, unfortunately *la fabbrica* was already outside in the fabric of
society

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CGL General Confederation of Labor (pre-World War II national Union)

CGIL Italian General Confederation of Labor (post-World War II national Union)

FIOM Italian Federation of Metalworkers

IWW Industrial Workers of the World

LC Continuous Struggle

PCd'I Communist Party of Italy (founded by Antonio Gramsci)

PCI Italian Communist Party

PPI Italian Popular Party

PSI Italian Socialist Party

INTRODUCTION

In his usual counter-intuitive style, Slavoj Žižek asks “what if philosophy – the need for authentic philosophical thought – arises precisely [...] when (other) parts-constituents of the social edifice cannot play their proper role?”¹ Italian society makes a perfect case for this hypothesis, and the peculiarity of its best Marxist philosophy (and perhaps the reason for its widespread interest today) resides precisely in the direct confrontation with repeated social blockages. As they were forged in the dicey environment of political praxis, with its shares of defeat and repression, these forms of Italian Marxism developed a capacity to interrogate the social in order to transform it that usually produced innovatory and advanced theories and practices.

I believe a key object for the understanding of our social edifice is the *biopolitical* dimension of labor, especially as it comes to the foreground in the particular setting of twentieth and twenty-first Century Italy. In the following pages, I argue that its preliminary articulation takes place in 1920 with the Factory Councils Movement and the workers’ self-management of production. Antonio Gramsci, founder of the Italian Communist Party, is the systematizer of the bulk of knowledge growing out of this experience and of the consequences of the Councils’ defeat with the introduction of Fordism under fascist dictatorship. The second stage is represented by the series of struggles which coalesced around 1968 and grew in intensity until 1977 when the Italian State violently repressed them. This wave of social experimentation was heterogeneous and stratified, involving not only workers but also students and women as autonomous entities. The third and last stage I explore is very close to us. In fact it is still in the making and no one can really predict its outcome or

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), x.

future shape. This global round of protest has been called by the media Anti-Globalization Movement or No-Global Movement; others preferred a more positive denomination such as Alter-Globalization Movement, or simply the Movement of Movements.² In Italy, the Anti-Globalization Movement faced its baptism of fire in the summer of 2001 during the G8 summit, though the emergence of a modern biopolitical subject had been theorized years before by Antonio Negri in the notion of the *multitude* following the philosophy of Italian *operaismo*.³ To simplify my argument: there are *three turning points* that define the emergence of the biopolitical in Italian society. Each of them staged the struggle of a determinate subjectivity against the mode of production in power: the workers of the Factory Councils faced the introduction of Fordism; 1968 that of Fordism in its advanced phase of automation of production; the multitude of the Anti-Globalization Movement that of post-Fordism.

What is the connection between the revolt of the workers as occurred in 1920, the long insurrection inaugurated by 1968, the recent protest of the multitude, and *biopolitics*? If we are to understand biopolitics as the modes by which the biological

² See David Graeber, "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 61-73; Tom Merters, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004).

³ For a definition of *operaismo* see among others Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto Press: London, 2002); Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), 36-39. The Seattle riots of 1998 started a planetary protests that reached Italy at the turn of the millennium. In Genoa during the G8 summit the Anti-Globalization Movement held a massive demonstration that was severely repressed by the Italian government. The Italian police killed a young protester, Carlo Giuliani, and tortured hundreds of activists. See Amnesty International, Public Statement, 21 July 2006, *Amnesty International USA*,

<<http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?lang=e&id=ENGEUR300052006>>; Haidi Giuliani and Giuliano Giuliani, *Un anno senza Carlo* (Milano: Baldini e Castoldi, 2002). On the Italian *operaismo* see Cristina Corradi, *Storia dei marxismi in Italia* (Roma: manifestolibri, 2005), 199-294; Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggiero, *Futuro Anteriore, dai Quaderni Rossi ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo italiano* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2002); Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, (New York: Semiotext[e], 2007); George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997); Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto Press: London, 2002).

and the social body come under the control of the state apparatus, that is, as the “politicization of biology,” my choice may seem rather arbitrary.⁴ In the specific case of Italian history, the forming of the state and its institutions (for instance the school, the asylums or the army) would appear to be a much more apt case study. Yet as I argue here, biopolitics grows out of a precise set of social problems that involve, but are not limited to, the control and power over population.

When Michel Foucault, the inventor of the term, talked about biopolitics in his *Lecture at the Collège de France* (now published under the title *The Birth of Biopolitics*), he focused on governmentality, or the art of governance as the conceptualization of a technique with very little reference to population as the distinct modern element that comes under the control of the state. The real novelty in Foucault’s argument is not the examination of the technologies of power and control, but the new form that the concept of *labor* takes up. In his account of the development from liberalism to neoliberalism, Foucault underscores the shift from a classical notion of *wage-labor* to the idea of *human capital*. The wage-laborer is an individual who sells his or her ability to work and receives in return an income. Human capital is instead “a machine that produces an earnings stream.”⁵ Once labor is conceived of as human capital and every worker is endowed with the capacity to produce gain, the typical capitalist process of accumulation is extended over the whole population – i.e. every individual now competes on the job market as an enterprise-producing profit and investing in him or herself in order to remain competitive.

⁴ Timothy Campbell, Introduction, *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*, by Roberto Esposito (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), vii. As Graeber ironically argues “states have been concerned with promulgating health and fertility since the time of Frazer’s sacred kings,” “The Sadness of post-Workerism or *Art and Immaterial Labor Conference* a Sort of Review,” *The Commoner*, 1 April 2008, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2008/04/graeber_sadness.pdf>.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 224.

Well into his discussion, Foucault admits: “I would like to assure you that, in spite of everything I really did intend to talk about biopolitics and then [...] I have ended up talking at length, and maybe for too long, about neoliberalism.”⁶

Notwithstanding this reassurance, unfortunately Foucault mentions biopolitics only twice in the entire series of lectures. The impossibility of defining biopolitics in a work consecrated to the investigation of its genealogy is obviously a symptom of something larger. Foucault is exploring a transformation which redefines how modern society regulates itself – a transformation that takes place on the terrain of the social relationships of production. His key assumption seems to be that, insofar as it is self-regulatory, the transformation of the art of governing is biopolitical. Not requiring an external authority to direct operations, biopolitics is an immanent, self-multiplying mechanism that operates from within the social body. Still, what is inherently *biological* and what is *political* in this transformation?

Several studies have picked up on this question. Italian scholars, in particular, have contributed copiously to the exploration of the concept of biopolitics. As I soon argue, Antonio Negri grafted his investigation on a free re-interpretation of Foucault’s concept. Giorgio Agamben and, most recently, Roberto Esposito instead have traced a wider historical trajectory for biopolitics, reaching back to Aristotelian philosophy. Revising Agamben, Esposito for instance argues that biopolitics refers “to the dimension of *zōē*, which is to say to life in its simple biological capacity [*tenuta*], more than it does to *bíos*, understood as qualified life,” but that both of them are also traversed by “*technē*,” i.e. modern technology.⁷ There are serious problems with Agamben’s and Esposito’s articulation of the concept, especially in the juncture, or as Laurent Dubreuil has argued, in the “disjunction between *bíos* and *zōē*,” that is to say

⁶ Foucault, 185.

⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*, 14, 15.

in the relation between the political and the biological substratum.⁸ To what extent is *life* in its biological form already something political for humans, which thus tends to be subsumed under the social? And to what extent does biological life, as an “invariant’s variation,” play a role in the political dimension of human life?⁹

Were the biopolitical only a politicization of the natural, there would be no real use for the term biopolitics. In fact philosophy has investigated the relationship between the human and nature since its inception. For my part, I believe biopolitics can explain a great many things, especially our present condition, but only insofar as it does not lose concrete historical referents. In my opinion, this implies a rigorous work of historical and critical reconstruction of biopolitics in its connection to the notion of labor and its conflicts. This is why I base my cultural genealogy of the biopolitical transformation in Italy on two basic assumptions. The first principle I draw from Raniero Panzieri – though to a certain extent it can also be found in Gramsci.¹⁰ Expanding on Panzieri’s notion of “sociological inquiry,” we can state that a comprehensive materialist inquiry of societal transformations

Refuses to identify the working class with the movement of capital and claims that it is impossible to automatically trace a study of the working class back to the movement of capital. The working class requires a completely independent scientific treatment because it operates as a conflictual –

⁸ Laurent Dubreuil, “Leaving Politics. *Bios*, *Zōē* Life,” *Diacritics* 36.2 (2006): 88.

⁹ Dubreuil, 92.

¹⁰ This methodological assumption is the turning point that gives birth to what has come to be known as *operaismo* [workerism].

hence capitalist – as well as an antagonistic – hence anti-capitalist – factor.¹¹

There is something radically different in the subjectivity of subordinated groups that cannot be reduced to the level of capitalist development. It is out of the conflict between labor and capital that new societal arrangements are worked through and spread over society. This suggests that the question of subjectivity is the blind spot of Agamben's and Esposito's discourse on biopolitics. Notwithstanding their philosophical affiliations, it is probably in Foucault that we can locate the origin of this absence, since Foucault predominantly studies the transformation of the modes of governmentality as theoretical shifts in political economy. He never truly addresses the conflicts that these transformations sought to contain or dissolve. I base my analysis instead on the recovery of the role of subjectivities and their conflicts.

Hence, the second assumption I borrow from Paolo Virno. This is my re-formulation: *the biopolitical dimension of labor is bound to the foregrounding of labor-power as it becomes a predominant productive feature in a given society*. I want to emphasize the difference between labor-power and labor. We must not confuse the two. Labor-power refers to the “potential to produce,” and not to the concrete production of the laboring process.¹² This is a basic difference that Marx posits as the foundation of his work when he says that the capitalist buys the worker's capacity to work for an agreed amount of time, not its actual work, its execution.¹³ Virno argues that labor-power reaches a pure biopolitical dimension when its potentialities are valorized as such, that is as a pure capacity. It is only today in the “post-Fordist era,”

¹¹ Raniero Panzieri, “Socialist Use of Worker's Inquiry,” *Generation-online*, <<http://www.generation-online.org/t/panzieri.htm>>.

¹² Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004), 81.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>>.

Virno says, that labor-power is not reducible to an “aggregate of physical and mechanical attributes,” and thus “encompasses within itself [...] the life of the mind.”¹⁴

It is with the rise of an economy predominantly based on the providing of services as well as cognitive and affective labor that labor-power can be articulated in all its material and immaterial dimension. The reasons for this transformation are, however, not to be found in governmentality itself. The new technologies of production and the employment of labor as pure potential are dialectically connected to the struggles of those individuals who perform that labor. It is the struggles and the practices of the subordinated groups that one needs to unearth in order to find the reasons for the organizational answers of the ruling class. These struggles have a scientific, genealogical value that lurks within the successive stabilizations of labor that power dictates.

This is why in the first chapter I take under consideration Gramsci and the movement of the Factory Councils. Historically, these councils represent a *preliminary* stage in the birth of biopolitics. There are differences of course. In an age of scarcity, society must deploy all of its labor towards the production of material goods. This kind of production is predominantly mechanical and physical, and consequently labor-power is put to use only in a reductive form. But the Factory Councils Movement too was setting up to develop an enhanced and free dimension of labor-power. For instance, as the conclusion to a series of articles on the theory of the councils, Pietro Mosso, Gramsci’s personal assistant at *L’Ordine Nuovo*, studied a school system integrated with workers’ factories. He argued that Taylorism assessed only “a particular side [of the worker] and cause[d] him to become an automaton.” Hence the need for a “vivification of the harmony” between the producers and

¹⁴ Virno, 81.

collective life through the establishment of a network of councils' schools dedicated to "1) the educating of the mind, 2) the training of all who can engage in social activities 3) the attainment, for all who can, of high culture."¹⁵ The emphasis on education is not a cultural tick but rather aims at surpassing the mechanism of brute production for profit, infusing the former with a scientific and intellectual quality functional to the development of society as an organic and balanced whole.

The stabilization of this wave of social unrest incorporated certain ideas of the Factory Councils, adopting a planned economy that rationalized society to increase profitability. With many contradictions fascism, soon after, embraced Fordism imposing a rigid authoritarian observance of Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management. But Fordism still demanded a firm political (i.e. external) control. As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt note, Fordism did "not succeed in consuming [individuals] completely in the rhythm of productive practices," and it did not "reach down to the ganglia of the social structure."¹⁶ In other words Fordist mechanical logic precluded a vital permeation of the organic. During his prison years, especially in an essay entitled "Americanism and Fordism," Gramsci instead embarked on the titanic effort of translating the Fordist re-organization into a potential revolution.¹⁷ Here, the difficulty in interpreting Gramsci's articulation of Fordism lies in the fact that we read

¹⁵ Pietro Mosso wrote under the pseudonym of Carlo Pietri, see "Il sistema Taylor e i Consigli dei produttori. La Scuola," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, reprint Feltrinelli, 27 (1919): 209. From here on all translation from Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated. Emphasis is in the original text unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 24.

¹⁷ See chapter 1. Fascism was born out of the general discontent of 1919 and the passiveness of the PSI. Benito Mussolini was swift in channeling this generalized anxiety and putting it to the service of the great capitalists and land owners who could not totally rely (as in the case of Giolitti's moderate government) on the state's repressive apparatus and needed a loyal military force to strike down a growing opposition. Yet just as Italy was only the first experiment of a certain type of fascism that would soon extend its dominion to other European countries, this brief but intense history of anti-bourgeois rebellion followed a larger European pattern. Gramsci perfectly delineates this contradiction in order to work out the institutions that the proletariat would have to resort to in its revolution. See Gramsci, "La settimana politica," Paolo Spriano, ed., *L'ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920* (Torino: Einaudi, 1963), 302.

his understanding of production through the lens of the transformation that occurred later. Said differently, the reader tends to translate Gramsci's open reflection into the fixed coordinates of capitalist modernity to come. But Gramsci had to make use of the Fordist conceptual equipment that was available. Consequently, it was on the basis of Fordist automation that he imagined a use of labor-power exceeding its mechanical limits, almost rising it to a biopolitical level. Hence Gramsci's focus on the body, on the nervous-muscular training of the worker at the assembly line, and its connection with the worker's life, and with other needs such as *sexuality*.

Even though he does not elaborate upon it, Gramsci taps into a problem that is crucial for the definition of biopolitics. Reproduction and its subcategory, sexuality, will come to the foreground in the revolt that exploded in 1968. When in the fall of that year, students joined workers in their protests, the stratification and the force of the insurrection reached a degree of virulence that paralleled very few other movements in the twentieth Century. Its magnitude and heterogeneity makes it also a difficult subject to assess comprehensively. This is why I dedicate the second chapter to Pier Paolo Pasolini's much written about debate with the so-called Student Movement. His insights serve as point of entry and critical counterpoint for my investigation. Starting from a relatively unknown documentary on Italians and sex, *Love Meetings*, and moving to the late essays included in *Lutheran Letters*, I explore Pasolini's reflection on the process of secularization in the field of sexuality caused by the rise of consumer culture and the modernization of the productive infrastructure. I also take into consideration Pasolini's ecological concern as a boundary for a society based on unlimited development. This is an issue that becomes central for the last part of my work when I assess the challenge that the multitude faces today.

In the third chapter, while assessing the cycle of students' and workers' struggle, I try to respond to Pasolini's (at times) too dismissive arguments. I provide a

political historical contextualization for the Student Movement and stress how it indeed promoted a strong critique of consumer society. Here I also trace the emergence of a concrete dimension of biopolitical labor which is dialectically defined by the conflict between the capitalist plan of development and the students' and workers' response. When I use the term "dialectical," I do not imply any definite synthesis, rather I am interested in the antagonistic link that the two *alterities* (capital and labor) establish more than in a final resolution. Thus, on the one hand, I deal with the new social figure of the *mass worker* produced by the mechanization of industry which empties out the content of any laboring process. On the other, I study the student as a new figure that grows out of the accumulation of larger quotas of intellectual work among the new generations who are kept in reserve as labor force in the university system. Both subjectivities strike an alliance based on the refusal of authority (in the factory and in the school) as well as on the refusal of operating under the exploitative regime of wage-labor. In breaking away from a linear path of education, employment and consumption, these subjectivities discover a new form of production. The famous slogan echoing the days of May – *L'immaginazione al potere!* [The rule of imagination] – developed into myriad new social practices.

These forms of social cooperation brought to light the fact that elements such as communication, creativity and knowledge were becoming decisive factors of growth. In other words, activities usually considered unproductive were becoming more predominant and so sanctioning the *supremacy of reproduction over production*. It is, in particular, with the so-called 1977 Movement that these practices openly exhibited their biopolitical potential. In this sense a key strategy was that of *refusal of work*. Arising from the student's and worker's insubordination to bosses and state authority, refusal of work made available time for experimentations which were still productive, but certainly not in terms of profit making. These activities were thought

to embody a new political dimension that surpassed any political organization. They were political insofar as they established and kept on expanding alternative and radically non-exploitative forms of sociality. With its rich cultural milieu, 1970s Bologna was one of the liveliest environments. Here I take as a literary study case the novel *Boccalone* (1979) by Enrico Palandri and the collective work *Alice Disambientata* (1978). These documents are exemplary of the demands of social transformation that this new sociality was engendering. They are a very rare kind of literature appearing “in the emergent sector” of biopolitical labor creating “new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences.”¹⁸

Yet, this revolution also became integrated and normalized by the advent of a more flexible form of control and production. Post-Fordism here is the photo-negative of the potentiality of reproduction imagined between 1968 and 1977. Post-Fordism shows how capitalism “put to work the Movement of 1977.”¹⁹ The possibility of deserting work, “a certain entrepreneurship,” the distinctive “taste for autonomy of the individual and experimenting”--all these elements define today’s post-Fordist labor.²⁰ For the Movement of 1977, the flight from the factory and union discipline was a way of sabotaging the machine, but capital too was interested in a similar process. In its restructuring of the 1980s, capital did not simply get rid of workers, but rather it emptied out factories from “workers’ organization.”²¹ With that loss the conflict against capital took on a much more disorganized and episodic nature.

In the fourth chapter I pose a different set of questions that complicate the linearity of the rise of biopolitics. If we define biopolitics as the valorization of the full potentiality of labor-power – that is to say in its immaterial and material components –

¹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 41.

¹⁹ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L’orda d’oro 1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), 648.

²⁰ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, 648.

²¹ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, 637.

one does not need to look at 1968, nor to post-Fordist information technology in order to establish a correct genealogy. Procreation and the work of reproducing the workers' means of subsistence are already a totalizing activity that involves affective labor, communicational skills and a good deal of physical abilities. Women were a *biopolitical workforce* long before the advent of post-Fordism. In other words, if biopolitics is the employment of the full potential of labor-power, women's work of reproduction *constituted* its primary occurrence. As it involves the totality of women's physical, emotional and intellectual capacities, the work of procreating and providing for the workers' restoration of physical forces is inherently biopolitical. Yet the task of taking care of present and future labor-power in all their aspects also emerges as an enormous source of unlimited and unpaid labor. The insight of the Marxist neo-feminist group *Lotta Femminista* that I study along with a play by Adele Cambria entitled *Nonostante Gramsci* [Despite Gramsci], is that the work of reproduction represents the matrix of women's oppression as it is intertwined with a set of desires, habits, needs and hierarchies that makes it a perfect self-functioning mechanism.

The famous feminist slogan "the personal is political" should now be rewritten as *the personal is bio-political*. Yet, this also implies that the epic history of ruptures and transformation that *operaismo* discovered in the new biopolitical dimension of contemporary labor slips unexpectedly on the waxed floors of women's kitchens. This is one of the critiques I direct towards Negri in the fifth and last chapter, where I examine the long trajectory he articulates in the transformation of labor-power from the Fordist worker to the mass worker of the 1960s, to the social worker of the 1970s, and finally to the new global political subject of the multitude. My argument is not ontological, that is, I am not stressing a hidden teleological assumption in Negri's thought that invalidates his theory. These are formal tricks that do not lead far. Rather, I argue that it is only from the full understanding of the ambiguous status of biopolitics

today that we can establish a solid theoretical ground for the understanding of the *historically varying nature* of the biopolitical constant. The biopolitical potential of labor-power was already active in the work of reproduction; what changed was the function it played in the transformations of capitalism.

The only way we can maintain the specificity of the biopolitical dimension of work today is by recognizing that, in the dialectic between labor and capital, a new form of production is worked out which sets the work of reproduction as a paradigm for the whole of society. Here the biopolitical dimension comes to the foreground, appearing as substantially new, even though it had been present for a long time. The feminist subjectivity is one of the primary agents for this transformation. Furthermore, there is also an evolution in Italian Marxist feminist thought shifting from a productivist to a re-productionist perspective. Previous feminists such as Camilla Ravera, for instance, advocated the socialization of domestic work in order to include women into production. It is only when neo-feminist militants clearly define the biopolitical dimension of the work of reproduction, and knowledge becomes a decisive factor of growth, that reproduction establishes its hegemony. This is why I argue that *the biopolitical dimension of labor is tied to the foregrounding of labor-power as it becomes a predominant productive feature in a given society*.

Unfortunately, as reproduction becomes hegemonic, the oppressive traits typical of the pseudo-servile condition of domestic work take over. Far from embodying the positive biopolitical potential for liberation that Negri theorizes, the modes of relation of the multitude bear the marks of this domination. In my opinion, the colonization of non-working time by working time is one of the major problems of his argument. It fosters a subjectivity that strives against a precarious life; a life that is disorganized and dispersed by a social cooperation that, at a formal level, gives the lie

to a unified global community, but that, in the everyday, generates a cynical form of individualism.

Against Negri's optimistic understanding of the multitude, I claim that the emancipative potential of this biopolitical subjectivity is highly ambiguous and needs to be worked out.²² We question categories as they fail to express practices of social change, in other words, when we cannot use them to discriminate between mechanisms of oppression interiorized by the social body and the cases in which, instead, that same social body affirms "a new dimension and direction of radical change."²³ Once defects and flaws are individuated, once harmful consequences are clearly understood, then a series of new practices can be elaborated.

I am not resorting to an essentialist and naively rationalist form of materialism here. I am instead embracing a revivification of what I call the principle of *immanent* or *materialist finitization*.²⁴ Material reality is the problematizing field in which contradictions arise and social beings operate through a task-solving methodology. In disclosing the subjective, self-positing, element of every objective determination, the human process of finitization is *immanent* without falling into a quietist acceptance of the matter of fact. Simultaneously, while expressing this dialectical relation to the

²² Galvano Della Volpe's lesson is still valid today. We can "arrive at an objective, non-one-sided, understanding" of our present condition only if our analysis "is capable of self-criticism. In other words, finding itself in crisis, it [our analysis] apprehends that crisis as the dubiousness of its own categories," *Logic as a Positive Science* (London: NLB, 1980), 192.

²³ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 26.

²⁴ Open-ended but *determinate*, this notion of materialist finitization does not mourn the lack of a totality (the grasping of a comprehensive and immutable totality), nor the outside of a transcendence that goes beyond the operativeness of our theory and practice. I borrow this idea of finitism from a series of sources. The first is the German linguist Harold Weinrich, who uses it to express a secularized idea of totality in a linguistic field, see *The linguistics of lying and other essays* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). I rephrase the concept through Karl Marx's principle of the absolute immanence of praxis that states that "mankind [...] inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve [...] the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation," Preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. R. Rojas, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>>. I was also influenced by Bruno Bosteels' use of the term especially during his talks on Borges at Cornell, 2006-2008.

material world as a limit, immanent finitization seeks to spell out the *conceivableness* of transformative practices in order to carry on, and eventually win, the political struggle against oppression.

It seems to me that Negri's notion of the biopolitical is deficient in this regard. Negri's philosophy is obviously a philosophy of *immanence*, but eventually it embraces a utopian tendency that weakens a concrete analysis of the multitude and its situation. More specifically, Negri endows the multitude with such a positive and constructive force that its internal contradictions vanish or are cast onto its opponent. Thus paradoxically transcendence re-emerges in the form of power/capitalism. As Negri argues, modernity "is a crisis that is born out of the uninterrupted conflict between the immanent, constructive, creative forces and the transcendent power aimed at restoring order."²⁵ I don't agree with this simple Manichaeism: immanence *qua* the positive vs. transcendence *qua* the negative. Immanence is neither good nor bad in itself; it represents the condition of possibility for something to be actualized. I follow Deleuze on this point. Immanence is "a transcendental field," that is, "a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil."²⁶ If immanence is a liquid surface, human processes are the crest of the waves. Human actions are *immanent* to their material reality and, as humans actualize them, they acquire a distinct value which is *historically judgeable*. Hence the problem one encounters in Negri's work: having attached a positive transcendental value to the historically determined concept of the multitude, his theory cannot really attend to the contradictions of the multitude. The multitude's project of social change must include instead a laborious work of critique and definition of our categories. We need to sift through the multitude's dynamics of oppression and behaviors in order to define and possibly change them.

²⁵ Hardt and Negri, 76.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence. Essays on A Life* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 26, 29.

In the last chapter I take into consideration a set of contradictions that entangle the multitude's everyday life. Here I want to draw attention to two key issues. The first one is sexuality. In my opinion, assuming Pasolini's and the neo-feminists' view of reproduction as a function of the capitalist process of accumulation implies the dismissing of a project of social change based on the pure political value of the *libidinal* drive and its free circulation. This is a battle that the 1968 Movement fought long time ago under the Fordist rule. Post-Fordism integrated a liberalized form of sexuality and now feeds on flexibility, free circulation, transitoriness and hedonism as an infinite motor for consumption and economic dynamism.

Secondly, assuming Pasolini's critique of consumer society and capitalist development also implies taking charge of the impending ecological catastrophe we are facing. To be sure, the very self-regulatory mechanism that mobilizes production and consumption is blindly pushing humanity towards early extinction. But the multitude too is a main factor in this massacre play. The planet, what Marx called humanity's "inorganic body," is our outer limit.²⁷ The protection and reproduction of *our relation* with the earth should be an immanent principle in the multitude's project of liberation. The technical capacities to achieve such a goal are at hand. What is lacking are planning and the organizing of the multitude's political force.²⁸

Silvia Federici and Mario Montano recently argued that with the Factory Councils Movement "the workers democratic-self-management c[ould] only pre-

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Martin Mulligan, *Marxist Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>>; see also Masao Myyoshi, "The University, the Universe, the World, and "Globalization," *The Global South* 1 (2007): 24-37.

²⁸ In revisiting Gramsci's thought on Fordism and the Factory Councils linking it to my genealogy of radical thought from 1968 to the present day, I go against Richard J. F. Day's notion that post-1968 and no global practices "cannot be understood from within the horizon of (neo)liberal and (post)marxist theoretical traditions, which are dominated by the hegemony of the hegemony," *Gramsci is Dead. Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 13. In Day's thought, hegemony becomes synonymous for state order. My work instead attempts to underscore how hegemony is linked to ideology as a collective worldview which is objectively effective. Certain features of the multitude are in fact hegemonic even though they are not coextensive to state policy.

figure [...] the workers' management of their very exploitation.”²⁹ Today this very exploitation runs society from within. There are no ready-made recipes. As always, the correct framing of the problem and its translation into the praxis of social transformation falls on “those classes and layers which have to sell or divest their labor power to the capitalist machinery of accumulation and regulation in order to survive.”³⁰ The following pages are I hope a contribution to this cause.

²⁹ Silvia Federici and Mario Montano, “Thesis on the Mass Worker and Social Capital,” *libcom* <<http://libcom.org/library/theses-on-the-mass-worker-and-social-capital-silvia-federici-mario-montano>>.

³⁰ Karl Heinz Roth, “Global crisis – Global proletarianisation – Counter-perspectives,” *Wildcat*, 21 Dec. 2008, <http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/actual/e068roth_crisis.html>.

CHAPTER 1

FACTORY COUNCILS, GRAMSCI AND THE RISING OF BIOPOLITICS

“Hello, who’s there?”
“This is Fiat Soviet!”
“Ah... pardon... I’ll ring again...”

(Conversation between a Fiat worker and a
costumer during the occupation)

1.1 “Two Red Years,” Factory Councils and Worker’s Antagonism

Every society defines what it considers to be progressive or conservative. But every society needs to carve this definition out of its historical roots. A pre-capitalist society organized around a rigid hierarchy, led by an unproductive caste tends to attach a high value to the qualitative uniqueness and authenticity of the single object.¹ In a society such as post-War World I Italy, where capitalist relations of production were rapidly molding a new nation, but where there were still struggles with a “prevailing system of material scarcity,” the value of progress tended to be identified with quantity rather than quality.² *Productivism* – as the “natural alliance of all producers ... against all parasites” – was its ideological base.³

From the beginning, the philosophy of Fiat (the first car industry of Italy) was to give concrete form to this modern type of industrial ideology. This understanding of production entailed the surpassing of the earliest conception of the automobile as a manufactured product. In Italy, up until Fiat started their mass production in 1903, cars were considered a luxury artifact that demanded a remarkable work of ideation, labor and execution. The pioneers who dedicated their lives to this work were at the same time engineers, inventors, amateurs pilots, with some pretension if not of art, at least of a highly refined craftsmanship. When at the turn of the century Giovanni Francesco Agnelli (1866-1945), an offshoot of a wealthy Piedmont family, decided to set up his industrial enterprise, he broke the link between the creative/artistic and the actual production of the vehicle. He bought the rights of the *Welleyes* model invented by the Ceirano brothers, slightly modified it, and sold it as a Fiat car. It was clear to him that in his industrial philosophy the issue of invention had to be progressively

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility,” second version, *Selected writings*, vol. 3. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 103.

² Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: The Rampant Press, 1971), 37.

³ Martin Clark, *Antonio Gramsci and the Revolution that Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 17.

“secularized,” that is, it had to develop “the capacity to renounce personal invention, when the time dedicated to produce this invention contradict[ed] that of initiating the production.”⁴ To industrialists like Agnelli it was already clear that quantitative production defined modernity. Authenticity and uniqueness were romantic ideals, whereas serial, standardized production was the scientific goal. But in order to achieve these high levels of productivity, Italian industrialists had to develop and extend properly productive structures: gigantic factories and a functioning and effective system to manage the thousands of workers they employed.

In a largely underdeveloped nation like Italy, which from 1908 to the beginning of the First World War was also in a serious economic depression, capitalism found a decisive aid to emerge from the crisis and to re-organize its productive infrastructures when the country entered World War I.⁵ At the cost of innumerable human lives, the conflict forced heterogeneous and largely underdeveloped areas to become more homogenous. First in the horror of the trenches, then in the factories fueled by the war effort, these realities were molded together under the iron law of an all embracing form of state monopoly capitalism which involved “mass industrialization and mass mobilization.”⁶ This mass mobilization entailed a growth of the state apparatus whose power was exercised in a usually authoritarian fashion in the direct politicization of the economy and a militarization of

⁴ Angelo Tito Anselmi, ed., *Catalogo Bolaffi delle Fiat. 1899-1970. Repertorio completo della produzione automobilistica Fiat dalle origini ad oggi* (Torino: G. Bolaffi, 1970), 15. This principle became a source of serious disagreement between Agnelli and his engineer and chief designer Aristide Faccioli, who had previously designed the first *Welleys* for the Ceirano brothers, and who, upset by this materialist turn, threatened to resign. In 1903 with the real beginning of Fiat mass production, Giovanni Agnelli had in fact decided to utilize the honeycomb radiator already employed by others, thus betraying Faccioli's belief in the unique, quasi artistic status that an automobile, as a mechanical but still original creation, was supposed to retain.

⁵ Alberto Caracciolo “La grande industria nella prima guerra mondiale,” *Il capitalismo italiano nella prima guerra mondiale*, by Giorgio Porosini, (Firenze: La Nuova Italia Editore, 1975), 120.

⁶ Gwyn A. Williams, Introduction, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, by Paolo Spriano, (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 9.

daily life.⁷ Through the creation of *auxiliary firms* the government took under its direct control those factories that were related, even remotely, to the war. These firms enjoyed a “military discipline, with the workers supervised by armed soldiers.”⁸ The advantages for the owners were enormous: class conflict was under the firm grip of higher productive interests.

Thus a large “military-industrial complex” developed rapidly and production directed by war necessities scored great profits for big capital.⁹ Prices, distribution and consumption were under strict state control; net industrial investments skyrocketed. In 1915, when Italy entered the war, they amounted to L. 78,616,000. By 1918 they had rose to L. 3,035,453,000.¹⁰ All fields related to the war effort took their share of profit. Between 1914 and 1917, steel production increased by 5.6 per cent, engineering by 10.2 per cent and automobile production “from 9,200 in 1914 to 20,000 in 1918.”¹¹

The core of the industrial and financial expansion was the traditional Turin, Milan, Genoa industrial triangle which was to dominate Italian economic history throughout the course of the entire twentieth Century. Ansaldo, the giant shipbuilder and artillery producer during the war, had its base in Genoa; Milan was the headquarters of Pirelli tire producers and Romeo, the automobile factory. But the most advanced Italian heavy industry was Turin with the impressive productive structures of the Fiat automobile factory. Just as the steam locomotives for the Second Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth Century, the mass production of automobiles was going

⁷ See Porosini, 10-17 and Rosario Romero, *Breve storia della grande industria in Italia 1861-1961* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1988), 89-97.

⁸ Clark, 16; on the consequences of the war, Gramsci notices: “As a result of the necessities of the war, the Italian State took over the regulation of the production and distribution of material wealth as one of its functions. A sort of industrial and commercial trust has been set up, an equalization of the conditions of exploitation of the proletarian and semi-proletarian masses – which have had their revolutionary effects. One cannot hope to understand the essential character of the current period if one fails to take account of these phenomena and their psychological consequences.” Antonio Gramsci, “Workers and Peasants,” *Selection from Political Writings (1910-1920)* (London: ElecBook, 2001), 131.

⁹ Clark, 16.

¹⁰ See Porosini, 29.

¹¹ Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy 1920*, (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 44.

to play the role of the economic engine for the new century. Turin, the industrial “Capital of Italy”, was the future; it had all the prerequisites required to embody the mechanical face of modernity.¹²

Yet the psychological consequences of this mass concentration and technological advancements contained a revolutionary potential, for the administration of this mass industrialization implied a qualitative leap in class conflict. This leap became not only a reaction concerned with the basic means of existence, but something more: a fight over the very basis and control of the productive structure of the entire system. The shaky ground of the political situation provided the ideal condition for a popular revolt. The bourgeoisie had dragged the European nations into a war where millions had lost their lives, and in the aftermath of the conflict, despite the technical achievements, the liberal state was unable to find any real solution to the economic crisis that struck an exhausted population. What’s more, notwithstanding spectacular gains, in the years after the war capital’s growing tendency “towards stock-exchange and financial speculation blend[ing] with old protectionist attitudes [...] and lucrative supply contracts with the state” resulted in the “total failure to redirect production and accept marginally lower profits.”¹³

The productive contradictions intensified until they become unsustainable. Without the support of nationalist war rhetoric and the menace of a foreign invasion, the cohesion of the Italian nation was rapidly showing signs of a dangerous degradation. The economic burden of the war was enormous, with economic difficulties fueling social unrest.¹⁴ A vast mass of mostly middle or higher military rank veterans were struggling with their re-entry into a society in which their

¹² Gramsci, “The Turin Factory Councils Movement,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 433.

¹³ Spriano *The occupation of the factories*, 44.

¹⁴ See Roberto Vivarelli, *Il dopoguerra in Italia e l'avvento del fascismo (1918-1922)* (Napoli: Istituto Italiano per gli studi storici, 1967).

economic status was unacceptably lower than the social prestige they achieved on the battlefield. Most of the labor in the factory had been replaced by women, and now a gender conflict crashing class solidarity was fueled by rightwing groups and the government itself who showed recognition to its soldier by firing women from state employments. As for regular infantry men, once home, they had to face the fact that the promises of redistributing uncultivated lands made by the government after the military collapse of Caporetto had been forgotten as soon as the war was won.¹⁵

Antonio Gramsci was keen to pinpoint the dead end in which the bourgeoisie had wound up. On one side, the central government had to face the war debts and its “serfdom toward international finance” which implied greater taxation, while on the other side the social bloc that elected those officials opposed state intervention and drifted toward an “*indisciplina borghese*” [bourgeois indiscipline] threatening national unity.¹⁶ This objective push toward fragmentation was the result of “reactionary insurrection against the central government.”¹⁷ But the reactionary role played by the Italian bourgeoisies ultimately derived from its weakness, from not having learned under the war’s mobilization to “work coherently for unified goals. Smaller firms sought only an end to intervention, and the giants pursued their own private interests.”¹⁸

¹⁵ The only achievement the peasants reached was the establishing of the “Opera nazionale combattenti.” This foundation was in charge of purchasing land and redistributing it to farmers’ cooperatives, but it face strong resistance by landowners. Aurelio Lepre, *La formazione del partito comunista d’Italia* (Torino: Editori Riuniti, 1971), 127.

¹⁶ Gramsci “La settimana politica,” *L’ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, Paolo Spriano, ed., (Torino: Einaudi, 1963), 301-302.

¹⁷ Gramsci “La settimana politica,” *L’ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 301-302. In Gramsci’s reading, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s seizure of Fiume (September 12, 1919) best embodied this drive towards the undermining of the national institution, toward fiscal irresponsibility, towards a particularism that would ensure continuing high profits and social prestige.

¹⁸ Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe. Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy after World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 86-87.

Meanwhile in only two years, from 1918 to 1920, the dollar rose, tripling in value. “Prices followed the same index and only wages lagged behind.”¹⁹ Food riots against the cost of basic necessities spontaneously spread out in “Liguria and Romagna and in the Socialist North and Emilia. In some towns and villages, ‘Soviets’ were set up.”²⁰ In the year 1919 the conditions for a revolutionary upheaval seemed to be ripe. As Charles S. Maier writes:

All Western nations experienced new restiveness on the left after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and continuing radical turmoil from the 1918 Armistice through the spring of 1919. The forces of order had to make their peace either with political overturn, as in Germany, or, at the least, new attacks on capitalism.²¹

In Italy, in the brief window between 1919 and 1920, the “two red years,” the anti-capitalist forces challenged the bourgeoisie’s social hierarchy and their ideological and practical power. They confronted capitalism and the state power declaring they were ready to establish a new form of social organization that would solve the contradictions that were tearing apart society. For as Gwyn Williams pointed out, the social conflict that exploded between the spring and the fall of 1920 “was not over wages or hours. It was a battle in defense of the workers’ new Factory Councils which were threatening managerial autocracy.”²² If Williams is right, then we need to look

¹⁹ Denis Mack Smith, *Modern Italy. A Political History* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 291.

²⁰ Clark, 75; see Pietro Nenni, *Il Diciannovismo* (Milano: Ed. *Avanti!*, 1962).

²¹ Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, 4.

²² Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order. Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy 1911-1921* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 69; see also Darrow Schecter, *Gramsci and the Theory of Industrial Democracy* (Brookfield: Gower Publishing Company, 1991).

closely at the Factory Councils and their story and understand why they were considered such a menace.

Theorizing and Practicing the New Counter-Power: *L'Ordine Nuovo* (1919-1920)

The struggle for the Factory Councils takes place chiefly in the most advanced outpost of Italian capitalism: Turin. Turin represented the future, but at the same time had a weighty past, for the city and its socio-economic reality had a long-standing history of class conflict. Turin was the stage of such antagonism with the great metalworker strike in 1911 and 1913 and the insurrection of the summer of 1917 mostly led by women.²³ Despite the losses and the high tribute paid in human lives, this class antagonism had extended and grew stronger in the present: the eight-hour workday was first won in Turin by the autoworkers before the agreement was ratified at the national level; in 1918 the Turin proletariat grew large enough to sustain economically a local issue of the Socialist newspaper *Avanti!*²⁴ And lastly it was here that May 1, 1919 a group of young socialists – Antonio Gramsci (28), Angelo Tasca (28), Umberto Terraccini (24), and Palmiro Togliatti (26) – founded a weekly review called *L'Ordine Nuovo*.

In its first issues, the review concentrated on a general attempt to find “solutions to great social problems that can be reconciled and vivified into a harmonic and compact whole through the socialist ideology.”²⁵ But soon this broad scope became more and more precise. For the *L'Ordine Nuovo* intellectuals, production and its living dimension had to be thought as the logical point of entry in the revolutionary practice. A year later, in the article “The Programme of *L'Ordine Nuovo*” Gramsci wrote that the first, however still vague, objective of the magazine was to “study the

²³ See Chapter 4, 244-247 and Paolo Spriano, *Torino operaia nella grande Guerra (1914-1918)* (Torino: Einaudi, 1960).

²⁴ See Spriano, Introduction, *L'Ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 15-16.

²⁵ Angelo Tasca, “Battute di preludio,” *L'Ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 116.

capitalist factory as the necessary form of the working class, as a political organism and the 'national territory' of workers' self-government."²⁶ The driving force of the journal thus became the close study of how human skills and dexterity were put to work. Zooming in and on the dynamics of modern production meant not only disclosing the core of Italian capitalism, but also cultivating a possible new counter-power that generated its own political and social structure. Thus *L'Ordine Nuovo* was keen on listening to workers' opinion and printed several writings by workers. The writing that follows below penned by Enea Matta, employer of the Lancia firm, allows us to catch a glimpse of what was happening at the time in a common Turin body shop as well as to understand the possible developments of the conflict over the structures of production.

A worker completes a given job in a very short period of time, an achievement that would be impossible for other workers. This could be due to a higher intelligence, a more developed technical ability, sometimes only to stronger muscles, or more often to the avidity for earning that can debase the worker to a level lower than the beast. [...] One may remark that this hunger for profit is useful for the increase of production. But this remains open to question, and in any case, it would be worth questioning if this increase would happen at the price of the creation of an environment completely opposed to that which we Socialists want to create for the workshop.²⁷

²⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 179.

²⁷ Enea Matta, "Vita operaia. Psicologia da proprietari," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 1919-1920, 138.

Here Matta argues against a diffused individualist mentality fostered by work organization in the shop. Yet the particular mode of this individualism reveals the condition of production in the body shop. At this point, even in the best factories, the control over the actual execution was still something that to a certain extent the worker could exercise. The most skilled workers could perform their tasks in limited productive areas, for the assembly line was introduced in the brand new Lingotto plant only in 1919. Though still not completely incorporated into the whole cycle of production, the worker had some margins of control over the time and the space s/he inhabited. The kind of life lived in the factory environment was geared to production only in so far as it pertained to the limited, circumvented realization of a part of the labor process.

To return to Fiat and the figure of Agnelli, it is well known that the latter was an admirer of the principles of scientific management of Frederick Winslow Taylor, and that he visited the Detroit plants in 1913. Once back the slogan “do like Ford!” became Agnelli’s priority, but he probably understood little of the potential of his doctrine. He certainly overlooked the most refined non-coercive forms of compulsion that the most advanced American factories were developing as the first drive to sustain production. Rather than employing extensively the high paying strategy, Agnelli preferred the war-time practice of coercive administration of labor. Thus other than the oppressive control by the shop intended to prevent soldiering and increase production, it was probably the piece work method the only technique introduced to have workers embrace the management’s productivist ethic.²⁸

²⁸ Taylor’s book knew in fact only on three re-printings (1915, 1928 and 1952), see Giancarlo Zinoni, “Soldiering,” *Altronovecento* 1 Nov. 1999, <<http://www.altronovecento.quipo.it/numero1lettura1.html>>. For the feudal framework of Agnelli’s understanding of industrial and labor relations see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publisher, 2003), 286.

This is what Matta (even if working in a different firm) pointed out: piece work labor could be effectively contrasted through workers education and active solidarity.²⁹ Yet he is careful to stress also the novelties that socialist production had to develop from the current modes of production. Such changes were to have a direct effect on the life of the worker: the reduction of the toil and the time he or she was spending in the factory. In Matta's words it was important "to produce more and better, reducing at the same time the physical effort. For if it is by now self-evident that in reducing working hours, one does not need to decrease production, but rather one tends to enhance it. Thus it is necessary to study the deficiencies that oppose this change."³⁰ Working less, while producing more--this is the solution that would be reached by the demise of the bourgeois command of production. Factory Councils were grafted onto this set of labor relations. They were the weapon which the worker could use to dismantle the capitalist apparatus of exploitation.

At this stage of development and despite the management's harsh, feudal control, this notion of the workers self-management of production was still a viable option since the formalization and standardization of the labor procedure was largely underdeveloped. What F. W. Taylor called "the mass of traditional knowledge" was to a certain extent still in the hands of the workers. Even if in fragmented fashion, the workers possessed individually specific know-how.³¹ The task was to recollect and reorganize that partiality in a new organization of production which was to be qualitatively better than the bourgeois system (though the final result was still industrial production). For in an "era of material want and relative limited

²⁹ Matta, "Vita operaia," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 1919-1920, 139.

³⁰ Matta, "Vita operaia," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 1919-1920, 137.

³¹ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1915), 32. The real problem for the re-appropriation of the line of command of production came with white collar workers and technicians who operated at a different level in the general process of production and had expertise which was harder for the workers to replace.

technological development,” survival was guaranteed only if the productive system was protected.³² As Gramsci argued in his polemics against “For Ever” – an anarchist who collaborated with *L’Ordine Nuovo* – failing to meet human necessities and well-being even “in a village of hundred inhabitants,” will render laughable (or dramatic) any “rhetorical enthusiasms and unbridled ranting” on the revolution.³³ These were the two moments of the revolution: first a transformation of production within the limits of certain socio-economic conditions, which is to say of a society still dealing with overall material scarcity. Only then, that is to say after overcoming material scarcity, – i.e. “the insufficiency of resources that are objectively or subjectively necessary to realize any given end valued by human beings” – could a new era emerge, establishing a new paradigm for dealing with promoting, and sustaining collective life.³⁴

Factory Councils were to be this vitalizing structure, the catalyst for a new upsurge of social energy that would define a new society with “the cells of the new order spring[ing] up spontaneously.”³⁵ Yet I want to stress that this new birth was linked to a framework where the struggle against the realm of necessity was crucial. Enea Matta reported “the principle that the workers grasped best is that, before taking the revolution to the streets, the problem of creating primary organs for the future productive communities must be posed.”³⁶ The workers and their families knew too well the outcome of impending poverty and deprivation if production were to fail. In order to promote that structural change that would put an end to this misery, the *ordinovista* group devised the simple but revolutionary decision, which was direct representation for the workers. It was made public in the famous “editorial coup

³² Bookchin, 37.

³³ Spriano, Introduction, *L’Ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 652, Gramsci, “The State and Socialism,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 102.

³⁴ John Kincaid, “Of Time, Body, and Scarcity Policy Options and Theoretic considerations,” *International Political Science Review* 4 (1983): 401.

³⁵ Gramsci, “The sovereignty of Law,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 89.

³⁶ Matta, “I Consigli di fabbrica all’opera,” *L’Ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 254-255.

d'état" against Angelo Tasca in the issue number 7 of the review.³⁷ Here Gramsci, together with Palmiro Togliatti, asked a more direct question: "How can the present and future be welded together, in such a way as to meet the urgent needs of the present and also to work usefully to create and 'anticipate' the future?" The response was that socialism and "the socialist State already exists, potentially, in the social institutions of the exploited working class."³⁸ The two major institutions of the working class were the Italian Socialist Party (henceforth PSI) and the General Confederation of Labor (henceforth CGL). The Factory Councils were to be connected, but for reasons that I will now turn to, they could not, nor should not, be reduced to them.

The Intellectual Landscape of the Councils: the Unions and the Party

The two pillars that sustained the Italian working class were both powerful organizations. On one hand there was the union: CGL by 1920 "numbered 1,930,000 members, of whom over half were industrial workers." Within this union the metalworkers (henceforth FIOM) lead by Bruno Buozzi claimed 160,000.³⁹ On the other hand, with the first male suffrage election of 1919, the PSI stood out as the single most powerful party – along with the Italian Popular Party (PPI) – and obtained as many as 156 seats in the parliament. As we will soon see, during the "two red years" the unions and their federation, while claiming to fight for workers' power, were not able and did not intend to embrace such revolutionary change. For Gramsci this was because their "syndicalist theory failed completely."⁴⁰ He claimed that "trade

³⁷ Gramsci, "The programme of the *L'Ordine Nuovo*," *Pre-Prison Writings*, 181.

³⁸ Gramsci, "Worker's Democracy," *Pre-Prison Writings*, 96; on councilary democracy see also Massimo Salvadori, *Gramsci e il problema storico della democrazia* (Roma: Viella, 2007)

³⁹ Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 25-26.

⁴⁰ Gramsci, "Syndicalism and the Councils," *Pre-Prison Writings*, 127. A premonition of the lack of any real revolutionary plan by the PSI and CGL took place in the summer of 1919. The food riots and the solidarity strike supporting the socialist republics failed to generate a national base for the revolutionary movement. Yet, it has been argued that their failure resides in the lack of a linkage, in the weak role and in the myopia of the PSI leaders. See Lepre, 145-148.

unionism organizes workers not as producers, but as wage-earners: that is, as creatures of the capitalist regime of private ownership, as vendors of the commodity of labor.”⁴¹ The CGL followed in fact a reformist platform. It built its consensus at the beginning of the century thanks to a capillary organization of the proletariat that proved effective in the struggle for higher wages and the diminution of labor time, but it viewed strikes only as an extreme measure and pursued a politics of compromise with the government.⁴² Its unionism fully operated within the capitalist framework and ultimately did not undermine it.

The PSI was in a better position and retained (at least until the occupation of the factories) a strategic role for Gramsci and the whole *ordinovista* group. The maximalist faction, the radical anti-capitalist wing of the party, outnumbered the reformists of Filippo Turati (1857-1932) and Claudio Treves (1869-1933) and decided in the Bologna congress of October 1919 that “the existing institutions of local and national government [could] be transformed into organs that [would] help to liberate people.” They expressed the need to “use new proletarian organizations such as worker’s soviets,” and the will to “adhere to the Third International.”⁴³ As it will become clear during the struggle of the Factory Councils in Turin, the gap between this “orgy of revolutionary language” and its practical application was unassailable.⁴⁴ Party members’ “social power” was exercised not on a real direct participation of the base but “by indirect means, by prestige and enthusiasm, by authoritarian pressure – even inertia.”⁴⁵ This was due to the failure of its leadership to understand and exploit the revolutionary process. It was probably a suspicious approach, if not a mistrust of

⁴¹ Gramsci, “Syndicalism and the Councils,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 128; see also Clark, 65-68.

⁴² Adolfo Pepe, *Storia del sindacato in Italia nel '900. La CGL e l'età liberale*, vol. 1, (Roma: Ediesse, 1997), 24-25

⁴³ Qtd. in Mack Smith, 287.

⁴⁴ Spriano, Introduction, *L'Ordine Nuovo, 1919-1920*, 66.

⁴⁵ Gramsci, “Worker’s Democracy,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 97.

the Russian Revolution as a political event, at least with regard to the theoretical import that this radical break had produced in western history.

Gramsci was one of the first to understand the theoretical consequences of the October Revolution. In a monumental article written for *Avanti!* he argued that this was “a revolution against Karl Marx’s *Capital*.”⁴⁶ Gramsci believed that Bolsheviks generated a rupture in history because “they [were] not Marxists; they [had] not used the Master’s works to compile a rigid doctrine, made up of dogmatic and unquestionable claims. They [were] *living out* Marxist thought” free from “positivist and naturalist incrustations.”⁴⁷ I will address this gesturing toward subjectivism later on, but for now it is important to underscore that Gramsci understood the unexpected seizure of power by the Bolsheviks as the opening of a new behavior that radically corrected the mechanist direction that guided official Italian Marxism – a widespread optimistic fatalism that saw in the purely linear unfolding of the means of production an inexorable road towards the revolution.

This theoretical discovery became the key for answering the impending catastrophe that was threatening modern western societies, i.e. the understanding for Gramsci that the bourgeoisies as the champions of progress *qua* nation-state building had “become incapable of this domination, because they ha[d] brought into being in the present destructive forces like crisis and unemployment, etc., every bit as dangerous and terrifying as those of the past.”⁴⁸ In the essay “The Programme of L’Ordine Nuovo,” Gramsci remembers the general apocalyptic feeling that in fact loomed over the nation: “we felt desperate, disoriented, swept up in the fervor of those months that followed the armistice, when it seemed as though Italian society was

⁴⁶ Gramsci, “The Revolution Against Capital,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 39.

⁴⁷ Gramsci, “The Revolution Against Capital,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 40.

⁴⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 358.

heading for an imminent cataclysm.”⁴⁹ The apparent closure of this political situation, despite the great changes that were taking place in the international context, was due mainly to the two dominating political forces and the theoretical framework in which they were operating. The capitalists, even if in the agony of an imminent collapse, held on tightly to their power while the working class still lacked the force to overthrow them.

Was this due to the military weakness of the anti-capitalist movement? It probably was, but only in so far as the real theoretical approach to the overturning of the capitalist order did not have its own solution. The urgency of the situation was widely understood, but the think-tank of the PSI sublimated it to the rhetoric of the ineluctable collapse of capitalism itself. This position was best embodied by Socialist maximalist leader Giacinto Menotti Serrati who “fully shared the ‘fatalism’ of the PSI leadership in the sense that he thought a revolution could not be forced or even ‘prepared’; in the crisis of capitalism the revolutionary moment would come.”⁵⁰ The menace paradoxically fed on an even more passive attitude: of a general and abstract preparedness which, instead of pushing towards concrete action to take hold of the course of events, fomented an intellectualization of the problem which was released into the ranting of a (rhetorical) call to arms.

Against this mixture of stoic expectation and dogmatic historical determinism, the *ordinovista* group had a concrete answer. The transformation had to begin inside the factory and then reach out to the whole of society. Thus they proposed changing the existing institution of the internal commissions into the more organically combative structure: the Factory Councils. The unsettling force of the Factory Councils was so disturbing that when confronted with the campaign launched by the

⁴⁹ Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, 178.

⁵⁰ Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 156.

ordinovisti, Serrati bawled “This is the realm of aberration!”⁵¹ The Factory Councils’ scandal had to do with a basic and radical democratic principle or in Gramsci’s language a structural element of “proletarian freedom.”⁵² Councils had to be constituted on the basis of a principle of one head, one vote. The notion was one *ordinovisti* advocated for all the workers, even the unorganized, along the lines that workers and peasants *had to be organized* by unity of production, i.e. not along craft-lines as in usual trade-unions.⁵³ In “Worker’s Democracy,” echoing the platform traced by the Industrial Workers of the World (henceforth IWW), Gramsci and Togliatti declared:

The workshop commissions are organs of worker’s democracy which must be freed from the constraints imposed on them by the bosses, and infused with a new life and energy. At the moment, these commissions have the task of curbing the power the capitalist exerts within the factory, and they perform an arbitrational and disciplinary function. In the future, developed and improved, they should be the organs of proletarian power, replacing the capitalist in all his useful managerial and administrative functions.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 157.

⁵² Gramsci, “The Programme of *L’Ordine Nuovo*,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 181; on the development of the internal commissions into Factory Councils see Battista Santhià, *Con Gramsci all’Ordine Nuovo* (Roma: Editore Riuniti, 1956), 50-60 and Mario Guarnieri, *I consigli di fabbrica* (Città di Castello: Il Solco, 1921).

⁵³ Lepre, 114.

⁵⁴ Gramsci “Worker’s Democracy,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 98.

The idea was to give direct representation to that “disorderly and chaotic energies” brought into the class struggle by mass industrialization and the forced recruitment of thousands of new (mostly peasants and women) workers. The change in class composition is central here. The unorganized represented a menace for the power structure that CGL – or as for the Turin shops, FIOM – had built in years of struggles against the owners. It was a mixture of loyalty to the union and to the party’s doctrine and a relative passivity in the delegation of powers to these institutions. On the one hand the union leadership overlooked the revolutionary potential sprouting from the subjection to capitalism of this new segment of the population, recently eradicated by its semi-feudal country life. They not only looked down upon this experiment, but saw it as a threat to the vertical organization (along craft-lines) of their institution. The result was that they set out to wage a conservative, corporate battle against it.⁵⁵

The *ordinovista* experiment, on the other hand, aimed at opening spaces of freedom in the crystallized union bureaucracy of workers’ representation. It promoted a vitalizing of the structure of workers’ power against its ossified institutionalization. Furthermore, they not only understood theoretically that the renovation of the internal commissions had to cling to the new composition of the labor force and give voice to it, but they were also keen in embracing a growing autonomist way of thinking that the workers themselves began to develop in 1918.⁵⁶ Martin Clark writes that

a group of workers at the Farina factory in Turin
wrote to the Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!*,
asking whether the Internal members of the
Commission should represent the working class or

⁵⁵ For this awareness of the new workers class composition see Gramsci, “Workers and Peasants,” *Selections from Political Writings*, 131-137.

⁵⁶ This tendency was typical of the “industrial society of the time,” Clark, 3.

the Union; and three members of the Commission replied that they represented the workers in the Farina plant, not FIOM, since they were elected by the workers, not the Union.⁵⁷

By 1918 internal commissions already had a sound history behind them (they were first officially recognized in “an agreement signed between [...] FIOM and the Turin car firm Itala” in 1906), and they acted mainly as “temporary bodies for specific grievances, with very limited functions and well under the control of the Unions.”⁵⁸ Pressed by the needs of their members, the institutional functioning of the commissions was slowly producing the conditions of their own mutation. This explains why for Gramsci the structure of workers’ representation had to be closely tied to the form of the labor process; they had to be nourished from this new form of life that labor itself was gradually engendering. Accordingly, the task of *L’Ordine Nuovo* was to provide a space for voicing and at the same time, clarifying the problems and directions of this new form of life, the “real life of an avant-garde proletariat such as the Turinese proletariat.”⁵⁹ *L’Ordine Nuovo* was a communicative (propagandist) tool and simultaneously a meaning making-mechanism aimed at defining the stakes, the conditions of possibilities, and the virtual lines of projection of this new structure of workers’ power.

Yet it was not only the union or the PSI who opposed the *ordinovista* platform. Even the left of the Socialist Party openly attacked the Councils Movement. Amedeo Bordiga’s magazine *Soviet* for instance, often criticized the Councils because he believed they could easily turn into a masked form of gradualism. Targeting his men

⁵⁷ Clark, 38.

⁵⁸ Clark, 36.

⁵⁹ Gramsci, “Cronache dell’Ordine Nuovo,” *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 1919-1920, 479.

as well who in Turin participated in the Councils Movement, Bordiga stated that this “technico-economic training in the communist system [...] whether it is called reformism or syndicalism, is defined by the mistaken belief that the proletariat can achieve emancipation by making advances in economic relations while capitalism still holds political power through the State.”⁶⁰ One can see the theoretical point Bordiga wants to score. He does not emphasize the danger of a possible cooptation of this new institution, but instead declares its artificiality precisely on the basis of two assumptions he shares with the *ordinovisti*: the critique against syndicalism as a regulator in labor commodity, and the idea that it is production that grounds class conflict and its potential resolution. Consequently, when articulating his theory of the new communist party, Bordiga limited membership on the basis of a strict understanding of the proletariat. Artisans and medium lower classes sympathetic to communist ideals were to be excluded if they proved to “liv[e] on the labor of others.” He argued that “some workers, even union men, could be excluded from the electoral lists of the civic political soviet, if, in addition to their labor in the factory, they lived from proceeds of a small monetary or landed capital.”⁶¹

Bordiga’s critique of the Councils, however, seems still locked in a strictly deterministic understanding of the stages of development of society. As a result, his political thought seems blocked by the split between the misery of the present and the promise of the plenitude of the future. The latter cannot be extracted from the present as Gramsci believes. Only the struggle for the conquest of political power via the communist party military action can achieve such a change.⁶² Control over production by itself merely reproduces the productive mode in force. As the break must be

⁶⁰ Qtd. in Gramsci, *Selection from Political Writings*, 303.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Williams, *Proletarian Order*, 176.

⁶² See Lepre, 210-212.

absolute, the *difference* of the social order must be produced through a radical process of negation of the capitalist order.

To this disjointed understanding of the relations between the present and the future revolution, Gramsci argued that one cannot simply anticipate the future by a pure political *act* of an enlightened minority. The function of the Factory Councils is precisely to form a sort of bacteriological colony that incubates the new. For in a society dominated by the bourgeois class “the actual unfolding of the revolutionary process takes place subterraneously, in the murky depths of the factory and of the minds of the countless multitudes that capitalism subjects to its laws.”⁶³ This unfolding, molded in the sphere of production, is political insofar as it is related to the contradictions arising from the clash between the forces of production. For Gramsci, revolution as the radical change that creates a new form of life cannot arise from “an arbitrary act of an organization that declares itself to be revolutionary.”⁶⁴ The Factory Councils are precisely the first site where workers practice the emergence of the new society, by understanding their own nature as “instrument[s] of production in a given organic system.”⁶⁵ So that if workers “build upon it a representative apparatus that has all the hallmarks of a State,” that is “the absolute, organic, closely corresponding to a reality that must be organized if bread, clothing, housing and industrial production are to be guaranteed,” they are actually beginning to produce and fully live that future that capitalist modernity is giving them in a mutilated, distorted and oppressive form.⁶⁶

The life engendered by the Factory Councils was for Gramsci the multiple and open-ended actualization of the new order. A new order though that was grafted onto a common base, that of productivism as the way of escaping from scarcity. Proceeding

⁶³ Gramsci, “The Factory Council,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 363.

⁶⁴ Gramsci, “The Factory Council,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 362.

⁶⁵ Gramsci, “The Factory Council,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 366.

⁶⁶ Gramsci, “The Factory Council,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 366.

from the transformation of workers from wage-earners to producers, the Councils Movement aimed at radically altering every aspect of everyday life. The dissolution of social relationships constituted by wage-labor and their replacement with a system of production which was collectively owned, developed and managed would have determined a new concept of life both at an individual as well as a public dimension. The scope of this project was essentially biopolitical, for as Guy Debord explained “in the power of the Councils [...] the proletarian movement is its own product and this product is the producer himself.”⁶⁷ Its practical realization however was crashed before it had any chance to take its first steps.

The Councils drawn into the Struggle: 1920 April’s Occupation and Defeat

It was in these conditions, caught between the Scylla of Bordighist sectarianism and the Charybdis of the PSI mechanistic position, that the Turin Councils were pushed into a major conflict by the newly reorganized General Confederation of Industrialists (henceforward *Confindustria*). Early in 1920, several strikes (polygraphists, rail workers) had paralyzed the Italian state, creating great apprehension among the bourgeoisie. For the industrialist leadership, the times were ripe to strike the first blow. The pretext concerned the introduction of the legal time certified on March 21. “Legal time was a characteristic feature of war-time Industrial Mobilization, and its introduction was thought to indicate the bourgeois government’s desire to maintain war-time industrial conditions.”⁶⁸ On March 22 the members of the Internal Commissions of FIAT reset the clock and were “dismissed for insubordination, whereupon the workers decided on an ‘internal strike’ – i.e. they

⁶⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Scribd, 2001, <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2510948/debord-guy-society-of-the-spectacle>>.

⁶⁸ Clark, 98; on the April occupation see also Camilla Ravera, *Diario di trent’anni, 1913-1943* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 51-54 and Santhià, 72-131.

stopped work, but remained inside the factory.”⁶⁹ The next day workers from the FIAT *Acciaierie* [steel plant] too went on strike since “their demand that members of the Internal Commission should be paid for the time they spent on their duties was refused. [...] Both these disputes were seen by workers and employers alike as matters of principle; in both of them, the employers’ authority within the workshop was the issue at stake.”⁷⁰ The internal strike spread throughout Turin and “on March 29 the industrialist retaliated with a lock-out” supported by the army. But it was only on the day of the settlement (April 11) that the industrialists launched their frontal assault. They “put forward a scheme to deprive the Internal Commissions of most of their functions.”⁷¹

As the Prefect of Turin wired the Ministry of Interior the “point of disagreement consist[ed] mainly in the industrialist’s firm intention to introduce norms into the agreement to regulate and discipline the Internal Commissions... this would represent a withdrawal of recognition from the present state of affairs agreed on, or at least tolerated, in the factories.”⁷² Their intentions were already articulated in the March Congress, when Gino Olivetti, the general secretary stated that it was unacceptable “to admit inside the workshop a power independent from the company management.”⁷³ The industrialist’s new scheme was the ultimate consequence of the war against the Councils, for the chances of a victory would have had a deep impact at a national level.⁷⁴ Workers were quite aware of what was at stake and, in the whole Piedmont area, 120,000 metal workers stop working for a whole month (the rest of them for at least ten days). As Gramsci proudly recalls, this meant that “in these last

⁶⁹ Clark, 99.

⁷⁰ Clark, 99.

⁷¹ Clark, 103.

⁷² Qtd. in Clark, 104.

⁷³ Qtd. in Lepre, 218.

⁷⁴ Antonio Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, vol. 1, (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), 53.

ten days, the general strike encompassed the whole of Piedmont, mobilizing about half a million industrial and agricultural workers, which is to say it involved about four million of the population.”⁷⁵

The reaction of the industrialists backed by the government was impressive. The scope was to isolate the hotbed of the movement. The city of Turin was rapidly put under siege with almost 50,000 soldiers patrolling the streets: “around the city, cannon and machine-guns were placed at strategic points.”⁷⁶ In the middle of this fierce struggle the PSI not only disavowed the strikers, but also decided to move the national convention from Turin to Milan. Later Gramsci sarcastically wrote:

At that time the Party National Council [PSI] was due to be held in Turin; however, its venue was transferred to Milan, for a city “in the grip of a general strike” was not thought to be a suitable theatre for socialist discussion. [...] While in the city of Turin the workers were courageously defending the Factory Councils – the first organizations to be based on workers’ democracy and embodying proletarian power – in Milan the leaders were chatting about theoretical projects and methods for creating Councils as a form of political power to be won by the proletariat. There were discussions on how to systematize conquests not yet won, while the Turin proletariat was abandoned to its fate and the

⁷⁵ Gramsci, “The Turin Factory Councils Movement,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 431.

⁷⁶ Gramsci, “The Turin Factory Councils Movement,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 442; see also Lepre, 218.

bourgeoisie given the opportunity of destroying whatever power the workers had already won.⁷⁷

The rest of the PSI was equally unsupportive. Even its maximalist faction barely went as far to express a general solidarity with the Turin workers. So as the forces withered away, the isolation of the Turin workers became unbearable. By the end of April, the strike was over and the leader of the CGL was charged with signing an “honorable” agreement.

The industrialists had won their first battle; they were able to create a more cohesive coordination, while the workers’ claim over the control of production was beaten back. At the national level, this implied that the Turin vanguards were marginalized. A severe break was introduced between them and the rest of the socialist movement in the country. Yet this defeat provoked not only an unequivocal split between the workers and their institutions (the unions and the party), but it also produced a deep internal crisis in the *ordinovista* group. Gramsci was practically isolated: Togliatti and Terracini sided with the maximalist group; Tasca with the union.⁷⁸ During the Second Congress of the Third International, the group was portrayed by the Italian delegates as a bunch of adventurists, undisciplined idealists and anarchists. But only a few months later, Lenin made clear that the *ordinovista* platform and the struggle in the factories were “in the main correct and [...] fully in keeping with the fundamental principles of the Third International.”⁷⁹

Meanwhile, by the summer of the 1920 the economic situation worsened. The omens of an imminent new economic crisis loomed over the whole country. The FIOM was negotiating salary increases, but the industrialists, well aware of their new

⁷⁷ Gramsci, “The Turin Factory Councils Movement,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 443.

⁷⁸ See Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista*, 53-57.

⁷⁹ Qtd. in Gramsci, “Editorial: 21 August 1920,” *Selection from Political Writings*, 445.

strength, decided it was time for the showdown. A *Confindustria* representative made this clear at the end of a three day meeting which achieved nothing. He said “since the end of the war, they’ve [industrialists] done nothing but drop down their pants. We’ve done enough. Now we’re going to start on you.”⁸⁰

Bouzzi’s answer was obstructionism. FIOM opted for a tactic of *slow-down* (also known as *go-slow*), a form of struggle designed to lessen the consequences for the workers who, while slowing down hurt production, but still maintained their salary.⁸¹ This sort of strike on the job had proved very effective in the summer of 1917, when the IWW mobilized the lumber workers paralyzing the entire state of Washington. The FIOM had also decided that “if any industrialist tried to counter obstruction with a lockout, then the workers would have to take possession of the factories.”⁸² From the beginning, the new Giolitti government chose a different approach to worker agitation. Giolitti had appointed the socialist philosopher Antonio Labriola as Minister of Labor, who had tried from the outset to bring the two opponents to an agreement. On August 30 of 1920 the lockout began in Milan at the Romeo factory, and then later the occupations rapidly spread. By the beginning of September they took over almost the whole peninsula.⁸³ The industrialist pressed for military intervention, but Giolitti simply decided to wait it out. The fear of an armed revolution skyrocketed. In a telephone conversation between Luigi Albertini the director of *Il Corriere della Sera*, and the journalist Giovanni Amendola, Albertini argued that it was time to “give power to the CGL,” prompting an astonished Amendola to reply: “But isn’t there anything we can do not to make the revolution?”

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 46; on the fall occupation see also Ravera, *Diario di trent’anni*, 60-73.

⁸¹ See Brian Basgen and Andy Blunden, “Worker Solidarity and Unions,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/u/npdf.htm>>.

⁸² Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 46.

⁸³ Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 60-61.

to which Albertini replied “Precisely. The only way to avoid the revolution is to give power to the CGL.”⁸⁴

The revolution almost happened. During the national council of the CGL in Milan, the leaders of the union met the party directorate and asked them to take the full responsibility for the military insurrection, submitting at the same time their resignation. The day after the revolution was decided by ballot. It was rejected by a majority of 591,245 against 409,569.⁸⁵ The political solution that the government imposed on the industrialists that the union boasted of as victory spoke generally of workers’ control, and it remained a parliamentary project which was forgotten as the economic crisis deepened. Giolitti had accomplished his masterpiece. He would do the same thing with fascism a few years later but tragically failing to obtain the same results.

Thanks to what Angelo Tasca called a “retreat forward,” the incorporation of the institution would come full circle.⁸⁶ At the national level, the reformists, in accord with Giolitti, chose as the output of the occupation to transform workers’ control into “a trade-union corporative control.” The arrangement “of a top-down control, devoid of any real power in the hands of workers” was a “stimulus to production, an instrument for economic renaissance,” which injected in the workers’ a certain form of optimistic mentality while reinforcing a strong productivist ethic.⁸⁷

After the two red years, the situation was finally stabilized through an institutionalization that carefully blocked any real production of alternative modes of living. In Charles Maier terms:

⁸⁴ Qtd. in Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 188.

⁸⁵ See Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 89-95.

⁸⁶ Qtd. in Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories*, 90.

⁸⁷ Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista*, 79 and *The Occupation of the Factories*, 100. Or as Maier puts it: “the councils could thus hold either old union beer or new revolutionary liquor. Bourgeois leaders were prepared to drain a glass if the workers agreed to the weaker potion,” 148.

To reconsolidate that social order was the overriding aim of conservative thought and action after 1918. It was the essential effort for the old right, often catalytic for the emergence of the radical new right, and a preoccupation as well as for many progressives not on the right at all. [...] It was an effort that was largely successful, even if the victory required significant institutional transformation. For there was no simple restoration. While Europeans sought stability in the image of a prewar bourgeois society, they were creating new institutional arrangements and distributions of power. [...] In each case corporatism meant growth of private power and the twilight of sovereignty.⁸⁸

It is here that capitalism leaves behind its liberal phase, to create a new equilibrium while transforming itself, and leaving untouched the prerogatives of its system. It is the realization in full of state capitalism, of something Marx had seen already developing with the rise of the first stock companies, which is to say the “abolition of capitalist private industry on the basis of the capitalist system itself.”⁸⁹ It is also the second phase of Gramsci’s thought that I will now readdress in a more explicitly theoretical perspective.

⁸⁸ Maier, 9.

⁸⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, ed. Chris Clayton, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch27.htm>>.

1.2 The Councils and their Philosophical Translation

Historian Charles S. Maier has argued that “the major proposals of the socialist left during the 1919-1920 centered around Factory Councils, nationalization, and economic planning,” but “it was the Councils Movement that embodied the most radical potential.”⁹⁰ This potential was at once *practical* and *theoretical*. As I noticed earlier, even if grafted onto the productivist needs of modernity, the Councils for Gramsci functioned as virtual structures that contained the seed of a new political order and of a new way of fashioning collective life. In the following pages, I will underscore the role played by Councils in philosophical terms. I will argue that from the Factory Councils’ practice Gramsci forged a theoretical apparatus for the critique of mechanist and idealist doctrines. In other words, the Councils as a structure of worker’s subjectivity are the means to bring into being a materialist theory of totality devoid of any metaphysical residue that would render its application in practice inadequate – i.e. the metaphysical (dualistic) positions of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile’s neo-idealism, and the orthodox Marxism of the leadership of the PSI and the reformist agenda of the unions.⁹¹ Once I clarify this point, I will explore Gramsci’s theorization of the experience of the Councils and his gesturing towards a biopolitical dimension of production. This is not a mere digression, for the critique of an idealist and positivist approach is key to the proper understanding of the issues biopolitics raises. Insofar as it brings to the foreground the natural dimension of production, biopolitics in fact needs to be linked to its human-like form without

⁹⁰ Maier, 138.

⁹¹ See Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e Storia della storiografia* (Milano: Adelphi, 2001); Giovanni Gentile, *Sistema di logica come teoria del conoscere, Opere complete*, vol. 5, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2003). This said I am aware that in stressing the role of the councils I am lessening other key elements in Gramsci’s thought, for instance the role of the party as the new Machiavellian prince that will emerge in the *Prison Notebooks*. But in choosing this line of thought I want to disclose the link between the promotion, sustaining and control of life (i.e. the biopolitical element) in its direct, affirmative moment (the councils years) and the more ambiguous (indirectly affirmative) elaboration in a situation of a vacuum of practice such as Gramsci’s prison years.

loosing contact with the natural substratum it relies on. Idealism and positivism, on the contrary, chose one element over the other, thus creating distortions and dangerous consequences at a political level.

Labriola's Influence: Understanding Materialist Finitization

In order to understand Gramsci's discovery of the Councils as revolutionary structures, I followed the historiographical tradition that usually mentions Gramsci's famous piece on "The Revolution against Capital" in which his "anti-positivist critique takes on a direct political meaning."⁹² Yet despite the Russian example he advocates, theoretically Gramsci's anti-positivism owes much to the philosophy of Antonio Labriola (1843-1904). The Neapolitan philosopher was the first to open a space for an effective elaboration of Marxist principles in Italian philosophy, the first to position historical materialism as that philosophy of praxis that would supersede the other two major currents of Italian philosophy: idealism and positivism, particularly its orthodox Marxist offspring, or as Labriola called it "naturalistic materialism."⁹³ For the sake of synthesis, I will condense the many contributions of Labriola's thought to one element: the de-mythologizing of a peculiar subjectivist tendency, spread through Gentile's actualism and Croce's thought, that seemed to be the only antidote to its opposite, but correlative process of positivist naturalization.⁹⁴

⁹² Leonardo Paggi, *Gramsci e il moderno principe* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1970), 13.

⁹³ Antonio Labriola, *Socialism and Philosophy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1907), 60.

⁹⁴ Others have correctly pointed out at least three major accomplishments of Labriola's philosophy: "the understanding of Marxism as genetic-historical methodology, of work as the concrete and universal mediation between men and nature and men and men, and of theory as a practical-scientific prospective of class struggle." Gianni Scalia, "Gramsci giovane," *Passato e Presente* 9 (1959): 1136-1137. I prefer to emphasize his contribution to the critique of idealism and positivism which, in Italy, can also be referred back to clear cut geographical differences. Positivism embodied the northerner cultural movement aiming to conquer the "Meridione," while Idealism represented the southerner counter-movement aiming it too to colonize the north. See Alberto Asor Rosa, "La cultura" *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 2, (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 879.

As the young Gramsci would say, the positivist vulgarization of Marxism had turned Marx's insights into "a kind of natural law, operating deterministically, quite outside men's will." People such as Claudio Treves or Filippo Turati (the reformist wing of the PSI) had fashioned Marxism into "the doctrine of the inertia of the proletariat."⁹⁵ Against the erosion of a concrete space of action, which orthodox Marxists branded with the shameful accusation of *voluntarism*, idealism seemed to provide a more practicable ground for the developing of men's capacity to intervene in reality. Yet, it was precisely Labriola who carefully marked the differences between a Marxist practice and the idealist-subjectivist concretion of reality. Let's begin with Labriola assessment of idealism in general.

Returning to Frederick Engel's *Anti-Dühring* (1818), Labriola argues that the kernel of idealism is in general metaphysical.

The metaphysical way of thinking has the following characteristics: In the first place, it regards as self-dependent things, as things independent of one another, those modes of thought, which are in reality modes only to the extent that they represent points of correlation and transition in a process; in the second place, it regards these modes of thought as existing before the fact.⁹⁶

By taking into account instead the concrete historicity of humankind, the philosophy of praxis "gives the last blow to all forms of idealism which regard actually existing

⁹⁵ Gramsci, "Critical Criticism," *Pre-Prison Writings*, 44.

⁹⁶ Labriola, 68.

things as [...] a priori thought, thought before the fact.”⁹⁷ These idealist generalizations that tend to elevate a singularity to the degree of an *a priori* are criticized by the understanding, on one side, of the specific relations that everything maintains with its (social) totality, and on the other, with the purposive nature of any human construct. Against these determinations, the philosophy of praxis’s thought always takes up the form of labor, i.e. a human-processual activity, “a process of creation in perpetuity.”⁹⁸

The interconnectedness and the purposive nature of any human activity also helps de-mythologize the vulgar form of materialism in use among the Socialist leadership of the time, a sort of scientism that worked via “a short cut from economic conditions to mental reflections.”⁹⁹ Here the epistemological problem of cognition that idealism poses is pushed to its full consequences. We cannot determine the univocal relationship between the economic and the anthropological dimension, which is to say that we do not know the thing in itself, for if it exceeds the subject-object relation it is by definition unknowable. Idealism here has easily the upper hand. Giovanni Gentile rightfully maintains that reality

Is not posited as the result of a process already completed
and perfect, and this result does not stand confronting
thought as a mystery. It is a mystery, for it is posited and
we ask in vain: Who posits it? The positive is posited in so
far as it actually posits itself, re-entering into that being
which is in so far as it is thought. The positive rather than

⁹⁷ Labriola, 60.

⁹⁸ Labriola, 61.

⁹⁹ Labriola, 66; Following Labriola, Gramsci later analyzed this pseudo-philosophy in the *Prison Notebooks* calling it “*lorianismo*,” from Achille Loria who vulgarized/forged Marxism in Italy at the end of the eighteen century.

something posited is really the self-positing [of a subject].¹⁰⁰

The moment we ask who posited reality we are shaping it in its relationality with us. This is correct, but for the people who are not well versed in philosophical subtleties, the reality that stands in front of them is not a self-positing act of their thought. It stands as the harvest or the flooding that could kill the peasants. It is something very concrete and out of their direct control. Consequently, unless you snobbishly dismiss people's common sense as boorish, idealism, praised as the sacred limits to knowledge by "a vast number of quietists on the field of reason," drifts toward an awkward kind of "agnosticism" that naïve Marxists mistook for an undisputable sign of bourgeois crisis.¹⁰¹ Labriola instead argues that Marxism cannot neglect this point by simply affirming a presupposed superiority to bourgeois weakness. Such an attitude falls into an empty arbitrary empiricism, i.e. one that lacks that historical relational quality that serves as a correction of idealism. Moreover it pushes toward that fatalistic optimism that contaminated the think-tank of the PSI which endorsed an all-powerful rule of the economic (the revolution due to the imminent collapse of capitalism) over the non-economic (the actualization of the subjective/revolutionary goal).

On the contrary, Labriola believes that idealist "agnosticism renders us [Marxists] a great service." The idealist agnostic dogma is the attempt to solve a concrete problem in a distorted way, or as Labriola phrases, it is an endeavor that lacks "the courage of truth."¹⁰² "By feeling regret for the impossibility of knowing this alleged mystery," the agnostic thinkers "arrive in their own way" at the "same result that we [Marxists] do, only we do not regret, but rather seek knowledge without the

¹⁰⁰ Giovanni Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1922), 107-108.

¹⁰¹ Labriola, 66.

¹⁰² Labriola, 66.

assistance of imagination.” The epistemological limit as the foundation of knowledge is not mystified in the sacred dogma of the unknowable, in the mourning of the absence of a fixed truth, but rather it is vivified as a dynamic principle of praxis. The result is that “human beings learn all they *must* know by an infinite process of labor, which is experience, and of experience, which is labor.”¹⁰³ Labor is action and then the experience of that action, just as the understanding of the physiographical situation of a territory grows out of the close relationship of the peasants who work the land. This collective knowledge, one may call it science, is the product of a specific society that orients its labor and energies to fulfill the needs established by its ruling strata.

But through the experience of their labor, humans are also subjected to further change. As Engels wrote “the hand is not only the organ of labor, it is also the product of labor.”¹⁰⁴ The philosophy of praxis represents a secular understanding of the impenetrability of agnosticism as a logical boundary that furnishes the basis for human self-transformative activities. Antonio Labriola’s main contribution was to bring to the foreground one of Marx’s fundamental discoveries that Gramsci used as a guiding principle in his definition of the philosophy of praxis. It is the principle of the absolute immanence of praxis as it appears in the preface of *The Critique of Political Economy*. “Mankind,” he writes, “inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve [...] the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”¹⁰⁵

The working out of a series of solutions of course does not imply its ultimate solution. But through this infinite process of individuation of solutions, in short

¹⁰³ Labriola, 101 [emphasis mine].

¹⁰⁴ Frederick Engels, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, ed. Clemens Dutt, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>>.

¹⁰⁵ Marx, Preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. R. Rojas, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>>.

through labor, the subject comes into its own, and simultaneously through that same labor's mediations the subject changes its being. This is the critical understanding of the condition of possibility not of the subject as an abstract entity (i.e. the idealist a priori), nor as a merely empiric agent, but rather as a concrete task-oriented agent that operates upon and against reality. This is the subjective space that Labriola assesses and urges an investigation of without falling into an improper subjectification or an equally empty determinism.

Immanence as Theory: Overcoming Croce and Gentile

The problem for Gramsci was criticizing the mechanist view without falling into the metaphysical and dogmatic assumptions of idealism. This is a narrow passage, because there are at least two similarities between philosophy of praxis and neoidealism that could generate confusion: *immanentism*, i.e. reality as fully inherent to the self-transformative activity of subjectivity (or the Spirit), and *monism*, i.e. the absence of a duality between these last two. Neoidealism is a philosophy of becoming as a human, historical process. But what is the object of this becoming? For Benedetto Croce the being of the *becoming* is human history, for Giovanni Gentile the spontaneous/pure act of the subject.¹⁰⁶ Gramsci argued that both conceptions were metaphysical and carried out, without acknowledging, different ideologies.

It would be impossible to summarize the philosophy of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) in a few lines. Suffice to say that in his reformulation of Hegel's dialectic, the Spirit does not move thanks to the overcoming of contradictions (*oppositions*), but organically circulates among *distinct* forms that are not reducible to a final synthesis. The four categories of the Spirit (theoretical, practical, universal, particular) are *distinct* even though they implicate each other. The Spirit never

¹⁰⁶ Whereas for orthodox Marxism it is labor as a set of natural laws. On Italian neoidealism see Eugenio Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, vol. 3, (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

synthesized these categories, but circulates indefinitely among them, manifesting itself precisely in distinct forms. For example, as the theoretical thought that thinks the particular (sensuous) the aesthetic embodies a distinct and determinate moment of the Spirit. As the theoretical activity that thinks the universal (ideal), the Spirit reaches a philosophical stage which is always idealism. But as the understanding of a truly universal and, at the same time, determined content, it is also historical knowledge. Being the pure reflection on concrete human-like becoming, idealist philosophy is thus always historiography.¹⁰⁷

Gramsci valued the subjective element of neoidealism, and especially Croce's insistence on philosophy as history. The problem is that this variant of neoidealism appears as the "retranslation into speculative language of the realist historicism of the philosophy of practice."¹⁰⁸ Severing theoretical (philosophy, aesthetic) from practical activity (ethics, economy), neoidealism falls into the mystification of its own activity,

¹⁰⁷ See Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (New York: Noonday Press, 1953). More in detail, Croce's philosophy wanted to preserve the dynamism of idealist dialectics through the critique of Hegel's "panlogism," i.e. the reduction of reality to the unitary rational form of the Spirit. In *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1906), Croce demonstrated that Hegelian dialectic was founded on logical error. The movement articulated through the different moments of thesis/antithesis/synthesis is built on opposites that exclude each others (103). Croce maintained that the fundamental categories of the spirit cannot be *opposite* to each other (qualitatively different), but only quantitatively *distinct* from each other. More specifically he states that "two distinct concepts unite with one another, although they are distinct; but two opposite concepts seem to exclude one another. Where one enters, the other totally disappears." (14) For instance, the universal and the particular, and the theoretical and the practical are distinct concepts (or forms in which the Spirit circulate), whereas truth and falsity, the beautiful and the ugly are opposites (antithesis that cannot be solved, and that fuel change). According to Croce it is necessary to avoid Hegel's resolution of the opposites, and "recognize the autonomy of the various forms of spirit, while preserving their necessary connexion and unity." (108) Oppositions arise in the actualization of the Spirit producing fissures, breaks and constitute the motor of concrete reality, becoming as change. The Spirit does not synthesize the opposites, but it *circulates* among its four *distinct forms*, these are the four categories of the Spirit: theoretical activity, practical activity, the universal or the particular. Aesthetics for instance is the theoretical thought of the particular. Philosophy is the theoretical thought of the universal, thus, since it grasps totality in its spiritual movement, philosophy is strictly identified with idealism and in its concrete content with historiography. On opposites and historiography see also Benedetto Croce, "Sulla teoria della distinzione e delle quattro categorie spirituali," *Filosofia e storiografia* (Bari: Laterza, 1949).

¹⁰⁸ Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (London: ElectBook, 2001), 355. For Croce in fact praxis is distinct from theoretical activity.

for it generates a theory that masks its position and frames history into an essentialist notion of truth. What is lacking in Croce is the awareness of the ideological nature of his reflection, that is to say the “concrete instrumental value” that every philosophy carries within a given society.¹⁰⁹ On the contrary philosophy of praxis is linked to

the subjective [philosophy as history] conception of reality in so far as it turns this latter upside down, explaining it as a historical fact, as the ‘historical subjectivity of a social group,’ as a real fact which presents itself as a phenomenon of philosophical ‘speculation’ while it is simply a practical act, the form assumed by a concrete social content and the way that the whole of society is led to fashion a moral unity for itself.¹¹⁰

Croce’s idealism is only apparently an open dialectical thought, by masking its social character through its logical categories; it fails to express the ideological content that it carries. It determines the truth of becoming, not in its historical determinations, but through a subjective point of view that is posited as comprehensive, where in fact is partial. Croce for Gramsci represents the ideologue of the liberal state that praises an overarching idea of liberty which is instead the result of a hidden oppression, and that produces the illusion of change only within its accepted limits, never questioning the exception that funds its domain.

In this line of thought, idealism is also responsible for another kind of partiality. “Immanentist philosophies in general consist precisely in the fact that they

¹⁰⁹ Gramsci, *Further Selection*, 344.

¹¹⁰ Gramsci, *Further Selection*, 348.

have not been able to create an ideological unity between the bottom and the top, between the simple (common people) and the intellectuals.”¹¹¹ Whereas a universal philosophical movement “in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to ‘common sense’ and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the ‘simple,’ and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve.” It is only through this contact that “a philosophy becomes historical, purifies itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and becomes “*life*.”¹¹² Gramsci here targets Croce’s elitism. His assumption of having thoroughly comprehended the *universal* nature of change is shown to be utterly *partial* and hierarchical. Life for Gramsci is instead an organic connection between common sense and science, one that is truly universal as it expresses the understanding (theory) and thus the changing (practice) of the conditions of oppression (necessity).

The subjective/historical relationality prompted by philosophy of praxis also differs from the subjective synthesis of Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944), the illustrious minister of education under fascism (1922-1924) and the regime’s most prominent philosopher. Gentile’s idealism tended toward a strong actualization of reality – that is to say reality is always related to the activity of a thinking subject – which may be misunderstood for that unity of theory and practice that Labriola and Gramsci shared. It is true that for the young Gramsci, Gentile’s actualism represented “a radical reaffirmation of the freedom of human will,” as well as “a starting point for [his] anti-determinist dispute.”¹¹³ It is also true that Gramsci’s language shows a distinct *actualist* flavor when, for instance, he calls the Russian revolution “an act of the

¹¹¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 329.

¹¹² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 330.

¹¹³ Paggi, *Gramsci e il moderno principe*, 21.

proletarian spirit.”¹¹⁴ Historically, it can even be demonstrated that for some militants of the younger generation, Gentile’s emphasis on the “creative élan” as a call to act upon reality played the role of the occult master of Italian communism.”¹¹⁵ Yet, theoretically speaking, the distance between the two schools is noteworthy. For Gramsci, Gentile’s “ultra-speculative philosophy” is an always interior (partial) subjective determination of a non-critical subjectivity.

According to Gentile, dialectic unfolds between the “thing thought” (as a reality that is thought about) and the “thinking outside of which there is no thought.”¹¹⁶ Now the *thing thought* is not an abstract given entity, but an “activity” which involves a “will” to re-create the world in the very act of apprehension.¹¹⁷ Thus reality is the Spirit as it is *actualized* in the present, in a lived reality. Gentile recognizes Hegel for having posited reality as the movement of the Spirit, but he criticizes him for having thought becoming as something that grows out the indefiniteness of being, that is to say an encompassing totality non-reducible to the activity of the subject.¹¹⁸ Gentile’s actualism instead sees the becoming of the Spirit as radically immanent to the act of thinking, “outside of which,” as we said, “there is no thought.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Gramsci, “Notes on the Russian Revolution,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 31.

¹¹⁵ Sergio Romano, *Giovanni Gentile: un filosofo al potere negli anni del regime* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2004). On the blurring of actualism into philosophy of praxis see Eugenio Garin, *Cronache di Filosofia* (Bari: Laterza, 1959) and Paggi *Gramsci e il moderno principe*, 20-23.

¹¹⁶ Gramsci, *Further Selection*, 446; Giovanni Gentile, *The Theory of Mind*, 56.

¹¹⁷ Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922), 74-75.

¹¹⁸ Or as Gentile says in *The Theory of Mind* “an indispensable condition of understanding nature, as we understand history, in its movement, is that the object be not detached from the subject and posited in itself, independent, in its unattainable transcendence,” 53.

¹¹⁹ Gentile, *The Theory of Mind*, 56. This is true for instance for culture and education which Gramsci in his later writings took issue against. The idealist in fact “can conceive of culture solely as an immanent product of this very life.” In other words, just as reality is immanent to the form-making activity of men, “culture is what we ourselves are making; it is the life of our spirit.” See Gentile, *The Reform*, 76, 83. But culture as any other kind of labor, confronts a reality, mediates it, and in turn it is unpredictably changed by it. Gentile’s continuous process of subjectification instead gives back reality to the subject in an empty form, as a mere reflex of subjective determinations. Reality is uncritically subsumed, becoming a mere “invariant form of consciousness.” What is lost is the constitutive relation with “what

The result is often an authoritarian crystallization of power relations or worse, as in fascism, the justification for a reactionary violence, for the subject, unaware of its own mediations, enjoys the illusion of unrestrained power. This subject swallows everything, but in smashing the deterministic view of naturalist materialism, it pays a high price. Its process of interiorization knows no outside to the extent that the external is repressed and projected onto the subject's own self-activity. As Benito Mussolini argued: "one must recognize in the relativism of life and action [of fascism] an absolute supremacy over intellect." Thus fascism's "elating [*elevatistica*] critique has erased [the positivist/Marxist] historicist and democratic mentality in which the historical outcome is always known beforehand."¹²⁰ What is left to the subject is an open, blank territory to dominate. The world reverses into the manifestation of the subject's will: without being a purely solipsistic exercise, this concrete but crudely arbitrary act of force gives the lie to the righteousness of its praxis, forgetting the importance of "safeguarding precisely exteriority (contingence, eventfulness)."¹²¹

Summarizing Gramsci's critique of Gentile and Croce entails the uplifting of two of their most important philosophical contributions.¹²² From Croce, Gramsci derives *indefiniteness* as the organic process of change that avoids the reductions of a strictly deterministic philosophy. Only he does not predicate it on an abstract claim for the infinite circulation of the Spirit, but on the concrete, dynamic contradictions that are at work in society. From Gentile he derives exactly the opposite, the *concretion*

is not the pure spontaneity of the subject." Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 326.

¹²⁰ Benito Mussolini, "Nel solco delle grandi filosofie: Relativismo e Fascismo" *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 22 Nov. 1921.

¹²¹ Fabio Frosini, "Il ritorno a Marx nei quaderni del carcere (1930)," *Marx e Gramsci memoria e attualità*, Giuseppe Petronio and Marina Paladini Musitelli, eds., (Roma: manifestolibri, 2001), 45.

¹²² It has been noticed also that Gramsci's reading clearly undermines the type of immanence they proclaim. To the extent that they are imposed as metaphysical entities, the dogmatic presupposition of the interiority of the subject for actualism, and the abstract idea of the free movement of the Spirit for Croce are in fact "transcendent and dualistic by definition." Frosini, 45.

that human processes take up as task oriented activity. Only he disavows the subject's unrelatedness, and the authoritarian and essentialist nature of its determinations.

Concretion and indefiniteness come together in a constantly open process of individuation that guides the philosophy of praxis. In emphasizing this process of *immanent finitization*, I slightly depart from the reading that Leonardo Paggi offers – probably one of the best readers and systematizers of Gramsci's thought. Paggi argues that the break with orthodox Marxism entails for Gramsci the reassessment of the relations between the economic and the social, i.e. structure and superstructure. The economic represents the realm of the immanent, the non-economic the locus of the “subjective conception of reality.” Paggi goes on to say that “between the two moments, immanence and subjective conception, it is the latter which Gramsci emphasizes more” and uses in criticizing “positivism” as well as idealism via “the concept of prediction, the historicity of ideologies and their identification with philosophy.”¹²³

These last three elements constitute the point of arrival for Gramsci, but only as forms of an unbreakable dialectical relation between immanence and a subjectivist conception of reality. Let's first begin with immanence. The immanence of production does not constitute a plane of univocal determinations, but rather a problematizing field. A simple example that Gramsci uses in the *Prison Notebooks* while discussing the nature of men would make this point more intelligible. Gramsci quotes Feuerbach's famous statement “man is what he eats,” that is to say: structure determines superstructure. But ironically he remarks that “if this assertion were true [...] the revolutions would coincide with radical changes in the diet of the masses. Historically the contrary is true.”¹²⁴ It is after a revolution that diets are changed. Does

¹²³ Paggi, *Gramsci e il moderno principe*, 15.

¹²⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 354.

superstructure dominate structure? Gramsci answers that the statement “man is what he eats” is true insofar as diet is one of the expression of social relations taken as a whole.”¹²⁵ The breaking of a tradition based on a strict hierarchy brought about, for example, the French Nouvelle Cuisine, and in that it exemplified the bourgeois revolution, its ideology and its new customs.

Consciousness is the logical point of entry into the historicity of the discourse of production. Gramsci argues that “one ‘is’ only when one ‘knows oneself to be,’ [...] A worker is only a proletarian when he ‘knows’ himself to be one, and acts and thinks in accordance with this knowledge.”¹²⁶ This is why the accusation of “voluntarism” is for Gramsci an arbitrary, instrumental attack. For “will, in a Marxian sense, means consciousness of ends, which in turn implies having an exact notion of one’s power, and the means to express it in action.”¹²⁷ Will is neither a detached moment of the spirit, nor a purely reflective state of mind, but rather a coefficient of friction with the organized system in which every individual lives. So that it is only in conjunction with the marking out of the mechanics of oppression that this apparatus is pierced through, as the artificiality of its institutions are apprehended in the twilight of their crisis.¹²⁸

The subjectivist conception of reality is inextricably geared to the immanence of the social relationships of production. It is an anamnesis in that it measures scales of subjective recognition of a living objective condition. But the agency of this cognition is not extinguished in the re-cognition of a fixed, unchangeable state. It is labor in that the inquiry over reality is mediated and transformed by the development of the latter. The crisis of capitalism is not determined with the precision of a natural law, but it flashes out in the conflicts among the “unified whole of social activity.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 354.

¹²⁶ Gramsci, “Cultural and Poetic Mysteries,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 78.

¹²⁷ Gramsci, “Our Marx,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 57.

¹²⁸ See Galvano Della Volpe, *Logic as a Positive Science* (London: NLB, 1980), 192-193.

¹²⁹ Gramsci, “Socialism and Economic Organization,” *Pre-Prison Writings*, 48.

Subjectivist and common sense conceptions are thus *objective* visions of the world in so far as they are historical, manlike constructs. In fact here “objective” always means “humanly objective” which can be held to correspond exactly to “historically subjective.”¹³⁰ This is truly an open-ended process. Gramsci will call it “a struggle for objectivity,” with no real final truth, but with different levels of appropriateness depending on the task assigned. The objectiveness of truth is a function of its historical verification, i.e. the prediction of results is based on a self-aware and comprehensive analysis of the situation and problems that arise from it.

Theory tests itself through the moveable forms of the social, developing knowledge and producing degrees of true self-activity by grasping the purposive form of the social whole, where social is defined as the multiple interrelations between competing social groups and the productive system. The responsiveness to a given reality and its problems is the specific theorization of immanence. We become active in a given reality, only on the condition that we address the fungibility of its components. This is the conjunction of theory and immanence. As Gramsci will later write in the *Prison Notebooks*, “the term ‘immanence’ has in the philosophy of practice a quite precise meaning [...] such a definition would in reality have been genuinely theory.”¹³¹ For Gramsci the unity of theory and practice implies “the assertion of the historicity of philosophy made in terms of an absolute immanence, of an absolute this-worldliness.”¹³² The critical participation in the dynamisms of one’s environment entails a visualization of the logic, of the forces and lines of direction of that environment.¹³³

¹³⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 445.

¹³¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 450.

¹³² Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 536.

¹³³ This is also, as Gramsci knew well, the Greek meaning of the terms *theōrein*, “to look at.”

Pure theoretical contemplation is instead a form of empty “scholasticism” for theory/practice is “real knowledge” in that it becomes a mode of comportment, “a mass conception,” “that of a mass which operates in a unitary form, i.e. one that has norms of conduct that are not only universal in idea but generalized in social reality.”¹³⁴ As Paggi notes, this is the burden of ideology. Properly logged in its concrete historical framework, ideology characterizes any philosophy, even those which claim to testify to epistemological points of no return such as Gentile’s or Croce’s neo-idealist agnosticism. Every philosophy is form of ideology, that is, a worldview that registers a historical condition. Far from being a relativist claim, the ideological nature of philosophy welds it to an intricate ensemble of human activities. Without any regret for a transcendent point of reference, it measures degrees of truth on the basis of its own operativeness.

Finally, this historical clinging to social formations, to the material changes and struggles of specific societies is also the best warrant against the “possible aberrations that the idea of the coextension between truth and politics implies.”¹³⁵ So that, against the fideism of orthodox Marxism, as well as the tragic bureaucratic totalitarianism of Stalinist Soviet Union “for Gramsci, whenever the letter contradicts the spirit, it is the power that must yield: *life* is always more important than any of its abstract expressions.”¹³⁶ For Gramsci the uninterrupted breeding of forms of collective life constitutes the working principle of the process of finitization of philosophy of praxis.

¹³⁴ Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 537.

¹³⁵ Frosini, 55.

¹³⁶ Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 116 [emphasis mine].

The Councils and New Way of Producing

Now that we have detected the specifics of the philosophy of praxis, we can reassess the theoretical and concrete valence of the *ordinovista* thesis. In this way we can also better evaluate Gramsci's total adherence to the material conditions of the form of labor he tried to understand, i.e. the immanence of the *ordinovista* theoretical experience. Theory is the meticulous result of the actualization of the problems society posed in its particular time. Gramsci's theorization is buttressed by the smell, the sounds of the workshop and by the heated discussions in the socialist workers circles after work. Thus the democratic experiment of the Factory Councils was not an intellectual elaboration *post facto*, nor was it a detached academic rationalization of an empiric reality. Rather it grew with it and kept on growing while changing this reality and, in turn, being changed by it.

It is important to underscore immediately the difference between the union's attempts to institutionalize Factory Councils through the internal commissions, and Gramsci's capacity to apprehend the virtual function of the formers as implementation of new forms of life. The union's institutions were regulative factors. They aimed at channeling the conflicts in appropriate spaces which they managed along or in conflict with the owners. Unions reproduced their power by positioning themselves from a specific vantage point: that of a stronghold safeguarding a suitable exchange in labor commodity. The union's suitability for the capitalists resided in that syndicalism "prevent[ed] a still subaltern group from becoming hegemonic, by confining it to trade-union struggle alone [...] so that it is unable to take the state as its objective."¹³⁷ The form of life they managed, replicated itself in the precarious balance of power between capital and labor. The union heads used the inflammatory power of the

¹³⁷ Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980), 134; see also Gramsci *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 160.

rhetoric of class struggle not as a tool to transform reality, but as a weapon to secure the commitment of its members: the fidelity of the latter was in fact the foundation of the union's capacity to negotiate, but not to change, the economic organization in force.

The Councils, however, were the organisms capable of detonating the stasis of Italian society. They were capable of changing the rhythm of production, following the objectives of the proletarian order, realizing a correspondence between producers and their lives. The Councils are conveyors of this living energy and, at the same time, the source of its implementation through the learning of its practice. They are not stabilizing factors, nor are they harmonizing instruments in the management of the factory. Yet they are not even the embodiment of a small socialist utopia. They are still transitory structures who, in their experimental laboring, attempt to increase the practical understanding of how to build a new social form of life, that is to say a new political entity organically related to the social ensemble. Consequently, it is the immanence to their self-aware activity, their best criterion for their success, that is to say, "for a new type of state, on the model of the Soviet state."¹³⁸

This is why, compared to Amedeo Bordiga's conception of Soviets, the Councils are not autonomous, for they are not the incarnation of an *apriori* truth, of something determined before the actual process. The Councils are a precise critique of the dogmatic crystallization of Bordiga's thought. For Bordiga in fact, the breeding of a new form of life is the abrupt realization of the "possible," i.e. communism. The possible is juxtaposed to reality because when one "pose[s] the question in terms of possible and real, [one is] forced to conceive of existence as a brute eruption, a pure act or leap which [...] is subject to a law of all or nothing."¹³⁹ On the contrary the

¹³⁸ Buci-Glucksmann, 136.

¹³⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 211.

future must be generated dialectically from the present, in a Deleuzean sense its *virtuality* must be actualized through an open-ended social process. “The reality of the virtual is structure” and the Councils embodied this lively structure.¹⁴⁰ They carried out the task of imagining and actualizing a new way of producing and employing the workers’ capacity to work.

Furthermore, according to Gramsci, the process must be kept open and receptive to the external inputs the Councils face: first of all the confrontation with the institutions of the capitalist power, then their inner sustainability – i.e. the living necessities of the workers and their families. Hence the hierarchical structure (even though mandates are always revocable) which assumes the direct control of all the functions of the system

Every factory has become an illegal State, a proletarian republic living from day to day, awaiting the outcome of events. [...] Life has a logic of inner energy of its own that goes beyond the will and whims of individuals. While these proletarian republics live, they will have to cope with all the problems that face any autonomous and independent power exercising its sovereignty over a delimited territory.¹⁴¹

Sovereignty here means the organic connection with the rest of the country: thus military defense, and uninterrupted exchange with the rest of the system (i.e. inbound

¹⁴⁰ Deleuze, 209.

¹⁴¹ Gramsci, *Selection from the Political Writings*, 471.

and outbound flow of supplies). The testing of history however was merciless. From the military point of view the workers could barely defend the factories they occupied, while the selling of products proved to be extremely difficult and the supply of raw material largely insufficient to keep the system running.

Once again, the sovereignty of these political structures is not a goal in itself. The Councils were not self-sufficient permanent entities, but rather merely political avant-gardes, the high points of experimentations that can be “conceived as the initial moment of an organic period which must be prepared and developed.”¹⁴² Indeed the failure in protecting and nourishing this organic period, this incubating stage was not only due to lack of organization. The active sabotage of the union and the immobilism of the PSI were a crucial problem and the Livorno split of the following year was meant to be a radical measure to avoid such pitfalls.

The Councils were responses to the objective problems that society confronted at the time.¹⁴³ Objectively determined in the identification of a set of postulates, the Councils were responses that necessarily followed “from the complete conditions under which the problem [was] determined as a problem.”¹⁴⁴ The *ordinovista* thesis sought to produce a nourishing and a promotion of life which could fully express itself in the non-exploitative form of self-governed labor. With the shift from wage earners to producers, the workers Councils represented the appropriate structures for the continuous individuation of labor capacity in accordance with the needs of the community. It was a production rationalized and intensified in order to produce material and social wealth for the community. As I will now argue discussing

¹⁴² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 204.

¹⁴³ That is to say if they conceive of themselves as producers and not as merely wage earners. See Andrea Catone “Americanismo come modo di produzione,” *Modern Times Gramsci. Gramsci e la critica dell'americanismo*, Giorgio Baratta and Andrea Catone, eds., (Milano: Cooperativa Diffusioni '84, 1989), 46.

¹⁴⁴ Deleuze, 159.

Gramsci's reflection on Fordism in his *Prison Notebooks*, managed and creatively *lived* by the workers, this new productive order implied a potential qualitative leap in the way production was run and envisioned. Notwithstanding the quantitative limits of production, the Councils were posing the bases for the expression of the liberation of human labor-power.

This particular moment in Italian history represents the first attempt to rearticulate at a productive-industrial level labor-power *biopolitically*. In Marx terms, it was the springboard to start processing "general social knowledge" as a "*direct force of production*," not of production for the sake of one class, but for the sake of humanity.¹⁴⁵ This social knowledge was not the immaterial production that characterizes our economy in its global dimension. It is still mechanical and relies completely on physical components. But the self-management of production by the workers aimed at reducing toil and the fatigue of the long working day. Moreover, it intended to infuse production with worker's creativity, thus opening spaces for innovation led by workers themselves. In this workers discovered a way of producing knowledge from production that now did not estrange them from their work. Their activity was something they mastered and decided upon and had direct use value for the collectivity. This is in the nutshell the meaning of the Factory Councils' attack on wage-labor: transforming workers into producers who collectively own what they produce and consume. This production is thus *social*, entailing a collective endeavor, because it has as its objective the molding and supporting a new, harmonic collective life.¹⁴⁶ The Councils would have opened the way to a biopolitical dimension in which labor power is endowed with larger quotas of intellectual work. At a theoretical level, they represented the experimenting of self-critical, open process of finitization, for in

¹⁴⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 7, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm>>.

¹⁴⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 345.

their practice they were aware of their self-transformative nature without assuming the latter as an authoritarian will as in Gentile *actualist* philosophy, nor as the abstract universality of Croce's Spirit. All that humans could do (and do to themselves) had to culminate in their own development as a live, growing organic unity. This approach had all the potential to liberate human capacity in the least repressive way possible. Gramsci, the *ordinovista* group, and the workers of the Councils for a brief moment looked onto this biopolitical territory. But the Council's experimentation was too quickly undercut by political sabotage and then by the violent repression of fascism. Once this breach was shut, behind the bars of his prison, Gramsci dedicated his last efforts to understand how the capitalist response that replaced this possibility (Fordism) could be once again reversed.

1.3 Production and Reproduction in Gramsci's Prison Notebooks

Although protected by parliamentary immunity, Gramsci was arrested on November 8, 1926. A few days before Mussolini had escaped in Bologna an attempt on his life that became the pretext for the government and the King to wipe out "the little that remained of democratic freedom."¹⁴⁷ In June Gramsci was prosecuted and sentenced to twenty years in prison. The prosecutor during the hearing declared: "we must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years."¹⁴⁸

It was in the prison of Turi, in Puglia, two years after his sentence that "Gramsci was finally granted what he needed to work in his cell."¹⁴⁹ In the First Notebook he had sketched the outline of the work in sixteen points: here Americanism and Fordism appeared as number eleven. Yet in a letter to his sister-in-law, Tania, Gramsci reduced the project to three main topics: nineteenth Century Italian history, a

¹⁴⁷ Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci Life of a Revolutionary* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 217.

¹⁴⁸ Fiori, 230.

¹⁴⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 234.

theory of “history and historiography,” and once again Americanism and Fordism.¹⁵⁰

Between February and March of 1934 in the prison of Formia these scattered references were gathered in a single work now commonly known as Notebook 22. The first title assigned to the topic was “Animality and Industrialism” [*Animalità e industrialismo*], which was later changed to the current “Americanism and Fordism.”¹⁵¹

Even in its final draft, Notebook 22 appears clearly unfinished. Some of the opening notes are not taken up in the development of his argument and the writing is marked by sudden jumps, as if the need to fix key points were more urgent than to elaborate the connections. Giorgio Baratta’s astute claim that *Americanism and Fordism* is a “nervous and discontinuous [*saltellante*] rhapsody,” cautions the reader against a too-straightforward reading of the text. Instead it fosters a broader approach.¹⁵² I want to emphasize this element because, as we will see, my reading takes issue with recent interpretations that tend to reduce Gramsci’s essay to a productivist perspective, and to a moralistic/puritanical one in that of human reproduction. Undoubtedly Gramsci is our contemporary in what he has to say about the function of production, while it is true that he only gestures towards the productive element of procreation and the reproduction of labor-force. When faced with that possibility, Gramsci retreats. Still that shouldn’t diminish what matters most in his argument in Notebook 22.

The insights of “Americanism and Fordism” are, in fact crucial since they outline the consequences of a new integrated control over life that emerged after the

¹⁵⁰ Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, vol. 1, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 257.

¹⁵¹ See Giorgio Baratta, “Americanismo e fordismo” *Le parole di Gramsci*, ed. Fabio Frosini and Guido Liguori, (Roma: Carocci, 2004) and “Libri e articoli indicati da Gramsci” *Antonio Gramsci Quaderno 22. Americanismo e fordismo*, Franco De Felice, ed., (Torino: Einaudi, 1978), 121-124.

¹⁵² Baratta, “Antonio Gramsci critico dell’americanismo,” *Modern Times Gramsci*, 30.

Councils' defeat.¹⁵³ As I will suggest, this apparatus of control and administration of life brought forward by Fordist rationalization is placed at the threshold of the biopolitical, for it raises the question of a further exploitation of labor together with the implementation and management of life *qua* labor-power.

Fordism as the Concrete Translation to the Failing Rate of Profit

In its fragmentary form, the reflection on “Americanism and Fordism” is an analytical inquiry into the new organization of labor (Taylorism), the reorganization of the productive system (Fordism), and its ideological apparatus that was brought about first in the United States and later in a less homogeneous way, in Europe.¹⁵⁴ Thus Notebook 22 continues Gramsci's study of production as he developed it in the *ordinovista* experience, but because of the new historical context and censorship, it takes up a less straightforward perspective. For instance, the active element in it, the subjective tension that in the Councils' days was generated by the direct participation in the class struggle, is now limited to a few predictive statements.

The environment of the *Prison Notebooks* is not that of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, where the problem of working out a revolutionary praxis from the objective situation was an organic task, collectively elaborated through the daily confrontation with its protagonists and antagonists. Within the walls of the prison, Gramsci “is trying to understand the different conditions into which he wants (or had failed) to translate the revolution and how these conditions themselves make the translatability of revolution

¹⁵³ In Hegelian terms Gramsci's intellectual enterprise consists in “looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it,” Pierluigi Ricchetto, “Gramsci e Taylor: dalla filologia dei fatti alla direzione consapevole del mutamento,” *Modern Tima Gramsci*, 74-75.

¹⁵⁴ In late 1920s Europe Fordism came to include Taylorism *qua* scientific management. Fordism instead became a fashionable label for an harmonious social growth and came to offer “a technological élan for the beneficiaries of the economic system that Taylorism could not safely provide.” Charles S. Maier, “Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European ideologies and the vision of industrial productivity in the 1920's,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1970): 55.

possible.”¹⁵⁵ Now these conditions are the historical bulk of notions and events that he collects in his *Prison Notebooks*. In this the *Notebooks* bear extraordinary resemblance with another monumental work of roughly the same period: Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946). Written in exile and supposedly without access to the texts he was using, Auerbach elaborated the notion of *figurality* as an interpretative paradigm in which the figural relation “between two events or persons” is established “in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfils the first.”¹⁵⁶ Accordingly for Gramsci Dante’s Cavalcanti, Machiavelli, and the Italian Risorgimento, among others, are used to study and define a model of social interaction. They work as a *figura*: “a sign referring in time” and simultaneously “manifest and present” in its own historical context.¹⁵⁷ Their full significance (*figurality*) is thus the dynamic relation between the function they perform and their explanatory potential for the future. But the function they perform is worked out (translated) by the interpreter, who gives a “normative judgment that makes the translation a historical act.”¹⁵⁸ In Gramsci there is always a fundamental *subjective* element that works as a catalyst in this process, but in the *Notebooks* this endeavor is enclosed within the limits of an intellectual operability (i.e., book learning) and most important within the impossibility of spelling out the content of this act because of fascist censorship.

Thus, Notebook 22 embodies a particular kind of exercise in *translatability*. It is a negative model presently in operation, which must be prefigured as an instrument of liberation. But this *present* is also the result of reorganization, that is to say capital’s

¹⁵⁵ Peter Ives, *Gramsci’s Politics of Language. Engaging the Bakhtin Circle and the Frankfurt School* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), 103.

¹⁵⁶ Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 73. Ives correctly connects the notion of translatability to Benjamin, 97-133.

¹⁵⁷ Arne Melberg, “Mimetic Temporality,” *Interlitteraria* 3 (1998): 109.

¹⁵⁸ Ives, 103.

own translation of the revolutionary potentiality of labor, into a more functional system of exploitation. In this Fordism represents the antipodal concretization of the virtuality that the Councils aimed to engender.

During the two red years, the forms of mechanization introduced were still partial, the workers retained an expertise and a vision of the complexity of the productive chain that enable them to run the factory during the occupation without any real support by technicians. Even at a micro level, the worker confronted labor as a purposeful activity carried out through instruments which, as Marx write “the worker animates and make into his organ ... and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity.”¹⁵⁹

The application of scientific management (Taylorism) had precisely the objective of expropriating this organic knowledge possessed by the workers.¹⁶⁰ Here the new optic revolution that the development of film was bringing forward played a key role in the quantification, measurement and expropriation of the fluidity of the gestures. An associate of Taylor, Frank B. Gilbreth, coined the term “Micromotion-study” and began vivisectioning workers motions with a “specially designed clock that show[ed] divisions of time so minute as to indicate a different time of day in each picture in the cinematograph film.”¹⁶¹ Work is snatched from its living dimension, chopped down into minute units, framed, computed and reconfigured into a new

¹⁵⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 6, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch13.htm>>.

¹⁶⁰ As Taylor envisioned it was a process of formalization through which “the development of a science... involve[d] the establishing of many rules, laws and formulae” in order to replace “the judgment of the individual workman,” 36.

¹⁶¹ Frank B. Gilbreth, “Units, Methods, and Devices of Measurement Under Scientific Management,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 7 (1913): 627. See also *Clockwork*. Dir. Eric Breitbart. California Newsreel, 1981. Walter Benjamin would foreclose this connection in his essay on Baudelaire when he wrote: “What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlines the rhythm of reception in the film.” Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 328.

representation. What the workers naturally performed was estranged and then imposed on them as a new, alien model.

Fordism further improved this objectification. The extensive use of what Marx called the “*automatic system machinery*” (for us the integrated system of the Fordist assembly line) begins acting upon the worker as a totalizing “alien power,” transforming worker’s “living-labor into the mere living accessory of this machinery.”¹⁶² Marx and Gramsci agreed on the fact that this process of dispossession and abstraction of the real content of labor was inscribed into the “necessary tendency of capital.”¹⁶³ Thus, in the prison years, Fordism came to represent a “counter-model to the state of worker’s Councils.”¹⁶⁴ At the same time, in its attempt at understanding the necessity, the logic of the new power system, Gramsci’s reflection also extrapolates progressive forms *qua* embryos of possible developments of the field. To the best of his knowledge and given the strict restrictions of its imprisonment, Gramsci still followed a strict materialist methodology where theory was synonymous with immanence. Thus he proceeded to scrutinize and chart the ways in which the new productive forces repress, discipline, but also animate the whole of the social body.

The nature of Fordism is clear. Gramsci says that it represents “the ultimate stage in the process of progressive attempts by industry to overcome the law of the rate of profit to fall.”¹⁶⁵ Marx had argued that “the growing application of machinery and fixed capital in general,” “produces a progressive relative decrease of the variable capital,” i.e. the salaries of the workers, which ultimately erodes the source of the

¹⁶² Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 6, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch13.htm#p690>>.

¹⁶³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 6, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch13.htm#p690>>. As we will see later on, even if it was not possible for Gramsci to have read the *Grundrisse* (the first edition was published in a limited edition in 1939 and 1941 in Moscow) there is a close affinity between the two.

¹⁶⁴ Buci-Glucksmann, 318.

¹⁶⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 280.

extraction of surplus-value causing “*a gradual fall of the general rate of profit*, so long as the rate of surplus-value, or the intensity of exploitation of labor by capital, remain the same.”¹⁶⁶ Croce strongly criticized this law as a clear instance of Marx’s mechanicism.¹⁶⁷ Gramsci knew well this argument and used this law only as purely regulating factor, purged of any deterministic or essentialist claim emphasizing its necessitating, but tendential nature.¹⁶⁸ He argued it was a material force that “presents itself with a certain automatism which allows a measure of predictability.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, for Gramsci, the model for the kind of structural necessity that these social patterns carry is not natural science, since, philosophy of praxis develops its concept of “regularity, laws, automatism” and ultimately “rationality” by way of conceiving the *necessity* of its historical “immanence.”¹⁷⁰

The constant pressure to accumulate capital, properly buttressed by laws and state protection, dictates the law of movement of the whole of society. It is an incessant process of transformation, which in its attempts to extract more surplus-value takes the form of technical improvements. Since the mere extensions of working time (what Marx calls the extraction of “absolute surplus-value”) has fixed limits, the capitalist needs to increase productivity (what Marx calls “relative surplus-value”) by means of technical advancements. Capitalists thus realize “an alteration in the labor-process, of such a kind as to shorten the labor-time socially necessary for the production of a commodity, and to endow a given quantity of labor with the power of producing a greater quantity of use-value.”¹⁷¹ This is the reason why the *law of*

¹⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, ed. Chris Clayton, *Marxists Internets Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch13.htm>>.

¹⁶⁷ See Benedetto Croce, *Materialismo storico ed economia marxistica* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2001).

¹⁶⁸ See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 429 where Gramsci warns against the political consequences of taking these laws as metaphysical elements.

¹⁶⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 410.

¹⁷⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 413.

¹⁷¹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch12.htm>>.

tendency remains structurally open: an increasing rate of the extraction of relative surplus-value can contrast the falling rate of profit. Fordism and the *dispositifs* it mobilizes are the response to this necessity – i.e. increasing profitability by way of enhancing productivity.¹⁷²

“Americanism and Fordism,” Gramsci says, “derive from an inherent necessity to achieve the organization of a planned economy.” In both their respective fields Americanism (the non-economic-cultural phenomena) and Fordism (the economic phenomena) correspond to the transformation from what Gramsci calls “economic individualism,” namely liberal capitalism, to planned economy, i.e., state capitalism in its various forms.¹⁷³ This new phase supersedes the liberal phase of capitalism but, as I said, by no means represents the actual realization of the emancipated and stabilized organization of society upheld by Gramsci.

Finally Fordism is also the specific solution as it arises from the struggle of the anti-capitalists forces, and the challenge they launched over the control of production. It is a form of stabilization of the unruliness of the workforce that, however mitigated and transformed, still achieved its goal: the exclusive control over the definition of the course of modernity. We posthumously can grasp the consequences of this victory in our own difficulty to understand Gramsci’s ambiguous treatment of the issue of production. In Notebook 22 the difficulty lies in separating Gramsci’s conception from the solution of the problem of productivity and societal organization as prescribed by his opponents. It is complicated to agree on those multiple virtualities that Gramsci was still able to see, because their actualizations now obey completely the law of the movement of capitalism. The eventfulness of Gramsci’s understanding of the

¹⁷² See Baratta, “Americanismo e fordismo,” 27. As Gramsci remarks: “the most effective means for individual entrepreneurs to escape the law of the falling rate is that of constantly introducing new forward-looking changes in all aspects of work and production,” *Further Selections*, 589.

¹⁷³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 279 [my translation of “*necessità immanente*”].

rationalization of production seems blocked by the ominous, oppressive mark cast upon it by the evolution modern society came to know too well. Yet, on one point Gramsci's reflection is prescient: any attempt to escape the immanence of the productive changes for a supposedly original dimension is a romantic misappraisal, a theorization that might be reassuring, but one that is also blind.

The Biopolitical Springboard of Fordism

Notebook 22 is an analytical inquiry of Fordism as the rationalization of the productive system and the new practices of social interaction it imposes on society. This inquiry is structured by the following question: how can we conceive a non-repressive rationalization that liberates productivity, and at the same time abolishes the ruling of one group over the other? Fordism is for Gramsci a negative model presently in operation, which must be prefigured as an instrument of liberation.

This goal Gramsci states in the opening of the essay. He writes that the set of problems "to be examined under the general, and somewhat conventional heading 'Americanism and Fordism,'" springs from "difficulties inherent in both the *societas rerum* and the *societas hominum*."¹⁷⁴ The conveyor between the human (*societas hominum*) and the natural (*societas rerum*) is the "process of development" that is set in motion, or resisted, by "particular social forces."¹⁷⁵ In general, this transformation is constituted by the whole sum of regulations and practices that produce progressively more complex forms of social organizations. It is a process of rationalization, in which rational choices and decisions are transformational practices that alter social interactions. This is true for the way society produces goods and circulates them, as well as for the way people stand in relation to one other. I will explore the pattern of this rationalization following Gramsci's dialogue with Freud, and then I will examine

¹⁷⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 279.

¹⁷⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 279.

Gramsci's assessment of the relational sphere of *reproduction* and finally that of *production*.

The development of complex forms of social organization follows the dialectic between repression and resistance that imbues the growth of the forces of production – i.e. what humans inflict upon themselves in order to develop their capabilities. It is an early example of the articulation of a psychoanalytic Marxist theory of human labor. Gramsci was not able to develop it, hence the contracted and sporadic form it shares with the rest of the essay.¹⁷⁶

Marx had said that “the object of labor [...] is the *objectification* of man's species,” but these processes of “conscious life-activity” occur, as Gramsci remarks, at the cost of immense psycho-physical sacrifices.¹⁷⁷ Gramsci argues that to compute “the cost in human lives and in grievous subjugation of instinct involved in the passage from nomadism to a settled agricultural existence” is virtually impossible.¹⁷⁸ In the note on “Animality and Industrialism” this description of societal changes through the repression of what he calls the “animality in man” calls Freud directly into question. Gramsci did not know Freud firsthand, and in fact broadly uses the term repression to mean civilizing mechanism, when the interplay and struggle between life-drives (sexuality) and death-drives (aggression) are in fact much more complicated, involving also processes of sublimation which are crucial to the growth of more complex social relations.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ For an analysis of Gramsci's psychoanalytic insights see Livio Boni, “Gramsci e la psicanalisi: frammenti freudiani dai Quaderni,” *Rivista di psicoanalisi* 2 (2003): 391-418.

¹⁷⁷ Qtd. in Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Psychoanalytic-Marxism. Groundwork* (London: Free Association Books, 1993) 25, 24.

¹⁷⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 298.

¹⁷⁹ Sublimation in particular, becomes a constituent of work, when the latter, “if it is a freely chosen one,” makes possible the “displacing of a large amount of libidinal components.” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21, (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 80.

From his Marxist perspective, Gramsci obviously stresses the historically changing nature of the mechanisms of repression, and not their a-temporal or cyclical dimension.¹⁸⁰ He maintains that “up to now, all changes in modes of existence and modes of life have taken place through [...] the dominion of one social group over all the productive forces of society.”¹⁸¹ Here Gramsci succeeds in criticizing two targets at the same time. First, the objectivist view of a linear evolution explained through the changes of the modes of production (structure). According to this mechanic perspective which Gramsci attributed to Nikolai Bukharin’s *The Theory of Historical Materialism* (1921), the structure (production) determines the superstructure (society). The quantitative transformations at the level of structure progressively change into a qualitative one. Thus in order for a revolution to occur there must be a change “within the structure where the various means of production develop and decay.” As we saw in the case of Feuerbach’s famous saying, for Gramsci it is instead the conscious activity and the level of hegemony consensus of the social group in power (superstructure) that determines the “transition” between one structure and the other.¹⁸²

The second objective is to signal the historical burden of the civilizing mission of a dominant group. For Gramsci the human process of civilization is a series of “incredible acts of brutality,” which impose “more complex and rigid norms and habits of order,” functional to the establishment of “increasingly complex forms of

¹⁸⁰ Now it does seem superficial to summarize the whole of Freud’s work with a few peremptory lines. Yet as Eugene Victor Wolfenstein has argued it is fair to say that Freud overlooked at least three major issues that Marxism posits and seeks to solve. The first is that against Marx’s historical understanding of human labor, Freud only sees work as “a sublimation of the basic drives,” and these are rooted in mankind independently from social-economic factors. Second, “for Freud the family is the primary social institution. Economic relationships are not brought into a determinate relationship to familial ones,” Wolfenstein, 51. Consequently, there seems to be no room for “envision[ing] a mode of social production that mutualizes interests and radically reduces collective hostility.” Nothing can really change this “innate human aggressiveness. No change in the social order can alter this fact of human life,” Wolfenstein, 51-52.

¹⁸¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 298.

¹⁸² Yuri Brunello, “Gramsci e l’idea di cultura, ovvero criticare la propria concezione del mondo significa innalzarla,” *International Gramsci Society Italia* <<http://www.gramscitalia.it/html/brunello.pdf>>.

collective life.”¹⁸³ These new constructs are not simply negative, since they are the result of a struggle of one group against the privileges of a minority “who happened to come to power at an earlier moment in history.”¹⁸⁴ Civilization is precisely the site of this constant conflict.

The Enlightenment, Psychoanalysis and Libertinism

But it is through the question of sex that Gramsci articulates the full implications of these self-transformative activities. Let us turn again to the opening of “Americanism and Fordism” where these re-organizations shape modern society, and where the repression of the basic drives becomes necessary to production. Psychoanalysis here is mentioned again:

Sexual instincts are those that have undergone the greatest degree of repression from society in the course of its development. “Regulation” of sexual instincts, because of the contradictions it creates and the perversions that are attributed to it, seems particularly “unnatural.” Hence the frequency of appeals to “nature” in this area. “Psycho-analytical” literature is also a kind of criticism of the regulation of sexual instincts in a form which often recalls the Enlightenment.¹⁸⁵

Gramsci’s goal is to uncover the ideological aspect of the sexual question, to pierce through its distortions in order to visualize the proper socio-economic

¹⁸³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 298, 300.

¹⁸⁴ Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, 10.

¹⁸⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 294.

contradictions.¹⁸⁶ Still why the comparison with Enlightenment? In what ways do psychoanalysis and Enlightenment resemble each other? What is the *form* of this similarity?

The limits of bourgeois revolution and its culture (i.e. Enlightenment) consisted in that its notion of universality relied on the exploitation of a larger social group: the proletariat. But as for its contribution to the process of civilization, in an early article on the magazine *Il grido d'Italia*, Gramsci called Enlightenment a “magnificent revolution” that “created a kind of pan-European unified consciousness, a bourgeois International of the spirit, with each part sensitive to the tribulation and misfortunes of the whole.” It was a mass-collective knowledge dedicated to the understanding of the social condition of their class and “the best means of transforming what have been opportunities for vassalage into triggers of rebellion and social reconstruction.”¹⁸⁷ As Yuri Brunello keenly points out, Gramsci here embraces a notion of culture influenced by the romantic idea of *Kulturkritik* as “subjective (and collective) will” upon which looms “the birth of a new economic, philosophical and political society.”¹⁸⁸

Gramsci’s evaluation of psychoanalysis has been questioned recently in an essay by Jennifer Stone. She argued that Gramsci’s moves through different phases, “After an initial enthusiasm he rejects Freud as the result of the circumstances of Giulia’s case history which led him to doubt the value of analysis.”¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, because of this rebuttal, Gramsci can not explain how “his own endorsement of

¹⁸⁶ Whereas Freud equals work with toil as an a-historical element of civilization, see *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2005).

¹⁸⁷ Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings*, 10.

¹⁸⁸ Brunello, 5.

¹⁸⁹ Jennifer Stone, “Italian Freud: Gramsci, Julia Schucht, and Wild Analysis,” *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28 (Spring, 1984): 108. On Julia’s illness see Chapter 4, 266-269.

regulation for the sake of production” would not reproduce “the repressive hypothesis” that psychoanalysis critiques.¹⁹⁰

It seems to me, however, that the role that psychoanalysis plays in the *Prison Notebooks* is consistent throughout, and that the endorsement of Fordism as a repressive apparatus must be read in the context of the counter-model analysis that characterizes “Americanism and Fordism.” In another note included in Notebook 15, Gramsci clearly explains the status of the discipline. The value of psychoanalysis lays in “study[ing] the unwholesome [*morbosi*] repercussions entailed in the construction of any ‘collective man’, any ‘social conformism,’ any level of civilization especially in those classes who ‘fanatically’ make a ‘religion,’ a mystique and so on of the new type of person that we must work towards.”¹⁹¹ To make a parallel with the Enlightenment, the latter was a vast collective movement, i.e. built on common sense, or social conformism – struggling to inaugurate a society built on liberty, equality, and fraternity, just as psychoanalysis inaugurated the critique of the repression of sexuality that the bourgeois were imposing through their new rationalization of society. Psychoanalysis translates the “non-authoritarian, spontaneous, libertarian” drives that result from such bourgeois disciplining.¹⁹² As it is, psychoanalysis is “more a science to be applied to the upper class,” but as a historical fact, just as Enlightenment, it maintains a figural value.¹⁹³ Gramsci’s warning against coercion and its unwholesome consequences is the base with which to develop a “a collective man without unleashing a certain amount of fanaticism, without creating ‘taboos’: in short, critically, as the consciousness of necessity, freely accepted because it is recognized ‘in practice’ as such, through an accurate estimation of the means and ends.”¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Stone, 110.

¹⁹¹ Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 414.

¹⁹² Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 414.

¹⁹³ Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 415.

¹⁹⁴ Gramsci, *Further Selections*, 415.

The criticism that both Enlightenment and Psychoanalysis perform, albeit in a limited and different mode, bears testimony to the functioning of philosophy of praxis. Their figural value can be read in two ways. First, following their critical capacity, the philosophical and intellectual unraveling of human processes and their contexts visualizes precedent modes of order and puts them into question. In the case of Enlightenment, the rise of reason undermined theology and its pre-modern form of sovereignty; while in the case of Psychoanalysis, the discovery of the unconscious (sexuality) broke the supremacy of the organic over the psychic. Once the older worldviews are properly read back to their limitations, their structure of power is questioned and put into crisis. This would be the first and most straightforward reading of this strange link. Another more interesting interpretation is the following. What if Gramsci perceived in both not simply their logic of demystification, but rather a more exterior element? That is to say, one that involves the fictitious nature that both Enlightenment and Psychoanalysis assume as their objective conditions. The impasse of sexuality on the one hand, and the lack of a pre-modern transcendental foundation on the other would constitute, in fact, the fabric of a new sociality that has to sustain itself through its effectiveness and operability. This would explain Gramsci's emphasis on regulations that seem unnatural and on the free acceptance of necessity. The objectivity of social forms rests thus on the self-positing and regulative nature of a social complex and can be investigated as such, that is, *formally*, without falling back onto some transcendence.¹⁹⁵ The core of philosophy of praxis resonates in the unexpected morphing of the two schools of thought.

¹⁹⁵ Similarly, as psychoanalysis stressed the theatrical essence of subjectivities, their masks and not their soul, the project of Enlightenment put into gear a major (scientific) work of disenchantment regarding what constitutes human nature. See Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 130-133.

To return to the specific case of production and reproduction, because Gramsci wants to investigate the economy of sexuality as a series of impulses and their containment as it is defined by a specific historical situation, he inserts this argument precisely in a discussion that regards Fordism, which is to say that sexuality is part of a series of factors “within the contradictory conditions of modern society, which create complications, absurd positions, and moral and economic crisis often tending toward catastrophe.”¹⁹⁶ So, while delineating the necessities of the new Fordist system of production, Gramsci also warns that “the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized.”¹⁹⁷ Given this rationalization, what must be avoided are “libertinism,” and a “libertarian mentality.”¹⁹⁸

Woman as Venerem Facilem Parabilemque?¹⁹⁹

As Gramsci censures sexual freedom, Jennifer Stone’s criticism of Gramsci appears to be correct, and in her appraisal she is certainly not alone. Several scholars have said that “Gramsci commonly reverts to a kind of left Puritanism,” or that when it comes to the delineation of the potential development of women’s subjectivity, he seems to be advocating for “a traditional idea of the woman.”²⁰⁰ Still one must

¹⁹⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 279.

¹⁹⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 297.

¹⁹⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 299, 301.

¹⁹⁹ Horace *Satires* I, ii, reads “namque parabilem amo venerem facilemque” that is “easy and accessible love.” <http://meta.montclair.edu/latintexts/horace/sermonum/1horace_serm2.xml> This passage was also used against the PCI and the left in their battle for divorce and abortion. See Guido Bernardi, *Parliamentary act 71, 1977*, 11 Jan. 1977,

<http://legislature.camera.it/_dati/leg07/lavori/stenografici/sed0071/sed0071.pdf>.

²⁰⁰ Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 114, Morena Pagliai, “Donna,” *Gramsci le sue idee nel nostro tempo*, Carlo Ricchini, Eugenio Manca, Luisa Melograni, eds., (Roma: Edizioni Unità, 1987), 90. Donald Mayer has proposed a more neutral interpretation of Gramsci’s framing of the relation between production and reproduction. Mayer understands the descriptive nature of Gramsci’s analysis, Italy’s “present was a matter of theory, that is, of will,” but he ultimately dismisses it as an inability to shake off “his Italian populism.” *Sex and Power. The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden, and Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 472,

remember that the idea of libertinism was in Gramsci's time a tricky subject, since it was generally linked to bourgeois feminist's movements who proclaimed to be trans-classist in nature.²⁰¹ Detaching the question of the woman from a social critique based on the historical and economic ground represented for Gramsci and his party fellows a blurring, a typical bourgeois deviation, a demystifying of class relations.

As I discuss later, Gramsci indeed dedicated much effort to the improvement of women's organization inside the Socialist party and later in the new born Communist party (henceforward PCd'I). Yet no claim of anachronistic over-interpretations can deny Gramsci's reluctance to deal directly with these issues.²⁰² The only (to a certain extent) continuous assessment of the problem dates back to when as a theatre critic he wrote several reviews of the major works that were performed in Turin.²⁰³ It is worth dwelling over a review Gramsci wrote on the 1917 Italian production of *A Doll House* (1879) by Henrik Ibsen, and then return to the *Prison Notebooks*. In this review the young critic scorns the deafness of the Italian public to Nora's "deeply moral action of leaving home, husband, and children to find herself, scrutinize her inner depths for the roots of her own moral being, and fulfill the duty we all have to ourselves, before others."²⁰⁴ Gramsci understands that the audience's dismissal was due to their servile moral code. For this code "the only manifestation of women's liberation" is "the high class whore," who is "downtrodden even when she appears to rebel, and when she

474. Needless to say this is due to the fact that he does not properly take into account Gramsci's attempt to lay out a biopolitical basis for production as reproduction.

²⁰¹ Pagliai, 88.

²⁰² During the first conference of the communist women in Rome, Camilla Ravera, head of the review *La Comunista* that Gramsci had strongly supported, recalls him quoting Lenin's idea that "no revolution is possible without the participation of women." See "Camilla Ravera. Il mio severo editore" *Gramsci le sue idee nel nostro tempo*, Carlo Ricchini, Eugenio Manca, Luisa Melograni, eds., 142.

²⁰³ Gramsci was particularly intrigued by the success of the actress Lydia Borelli (1887-1959) see "In principio era il sesso..." *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Torino: Editori Riuniti, 1975), 334-336.

²⁰⁴ Gramsci, "Morality and Moral codes, Ibsen a 'Doll's House' at the Carignano," *New Theatre Quarterly* 12 (1996): 259.

discovers the only permissible freedom available to her, easy virtue, it makes her more of a slave than she was before.”²⁰⁵

For Gramsci, even small post-World War I advancements that women obtained – such as the abolition of spousal permission to own, buy and sell properties – are compromised by the class configuration of a society which has created for women “of the upper classes a paradoxical social position.”²⁰⁶ Within the mass of exploited individuals, there rises a small privileged minority which enjoys restricted power due to the extraction of surplus-labor of their class at the expense of the rest. This emancipation is still partial since it is built on a fracturing of class and even gender solidarity, producing pockets of economic passivity, i.e. individuals living on economic rents.

The liberation of the woman resides instead in another form of relationship, in a new code “identifiable with universal morality, which [she] adheres to because it is deeply human, and more spiritual than animal.” Here “women are no longer mere females bringing up babies for whom they feel a love consisting of flesh and blood convulsions, but are self-aware human beings with inner needs.” This critique lays bare the delusional shortcuts and narrow-minded understanding of women’s condition by the Italian bourgeois. Gramsci’s call is definitely proto-feminist in that he pursues women’s desire against the oppressive patriarchal imposition and definition of their reproductive role. Similarly, in criticizing the reduction of the female subject to nature (“flesh and blood convulsion”), Gramsci does away with the erasure of female subjectivity that permeates patriarchal thought.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Gramsci, “Morality and Moral codes,” 260.

²⁰⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 298; see also Gramsci, “Morality and Moral codes,” 260.

²⁰⁷ On the problem of female subjectivity and patriarchal thought see Adele Cambria, *In principio era Marx* (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1978), 43-44 and Chapter 4.

However in terms of the understanding of women's actual freedom, one might catch here a whiff of familism. When Gramsci proceeds to give his proletarian counter-example, he recalls:

I know two proletarian women who understand it [Nora's drama], because they have never needed divorce or the law to achieve self-awareness or create a world where they are better understood and more human. These two proletarian women left their families, with the full consent of their husbands, who are not gentlemen but honest workers, and have gone off with the men best suited to them. They have *carried on* old familiar customs [*hanno continuato nella antica dimestichezza*] without creating the usual Boccaccio-like situations.²⁰⁸

The English translation of the article presents some problems. Gramsci usually employs the term *dimestichezza* with its first meaning of "familiarity."²⁰⁹ So Gramsci is not speaking here of domesticity, that is, the traditional duties and customs related to the idea of the household, but rather of the knowledge that grows out of the experiencing of each other as individuals in a relationship. The familiarity between individuals, not the monogamous family, is the locus of value. Familiarity is a secularized concept, for marriage is conceived as a moral commitment (hence the irrelevance of divorce) as the fulfillment of the needs and well-being of its members

²⁰⁸ Gramsci, "Morality and Moral codes," 261.

²⁰⁹ See "Letteratura popolare. Victor Hugo" XXIV and "Letteratura popolare. Il Guerin Meschino," *Quaderni del carcere*, CD-ROM (Roma: Edizioni L'Unità, 2007).

which, for what Gramsci argued about procreation, would include also the exemption from the marital duty of reproduction.²¹⁰

Nevertheless, it is true that the actual space for men and women's realization is conceived only in a relationship. Outside there seems to be only the pointless repetition the bourgeois false acts of liberation. The drift towards a supposed libidinal affirmation of the individual subject falls also into a saturated cliché: the Boccaccio-like comedy, or as Gramsci would recall in the *Notebooks*, sex as sport, which reduces the relationships between men and women to a game in which the female is only a prey.²¹¹ Far from being a real transgression of the social order, it is a congenial tool for the reinstatement of power; it is the typical way in which Italian society transforms real problems into harmless farce.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci rather pays more attention to sexuality it is linked to and influenced by production. Gramsci knew from personal experience that the effect of the introduction of a new coercive system of production resulted in a heavy burden on women. In a letter addressed to his sister-in-law Tania, dated October 20, 1930, he reflects on the recurrent crisis that his wife Julia underwent while working and raising his sons in Russia. For Gramsci, Julia's state was due to the refusal "to understand how a particular rhythm of work is possible only if the organism is replenished and by following a certain way of life."²¹² He then mentions the measures that Ford had introduced in its factories in order to ensure production.

He [Ford] has a corps of inspectors who check on the
private lives of the workers and impose on them a certain

²¹⁰ Gramsci believed in a "moral family as the centre of solidarity and spiritual life," Daniela Pasti, *I comunisti e l'amore* (Roma: l'Espresso, 1979), 52.

²¹¹ Gramsci, "Morality and Moral codes," 260, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 295.

²¹² Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, 356.

regimen: they control even the food, sleeping arrangements, the room size, the hours of rest, and even their most intimate affairs; whoever won't go along is fired and no longer has the six dollars minimum daily salary. Ford pays a minimum of six dollars, but he wants people who know how to coordinate work with their life regimen.²¹³

With this suffocating discipline, the real purpose of capital's interest in worker's life is blatantly revealed. The protection of the worker's health is exclusively linked to restore their physical strength. The well-being of the human is functional to the productive activity, to people's capacity to continue operating the machines. The new order generated by the application of scientific management aimed precisely at the birth of a "new type of worker and of man."²¹⁴ In the United States, it was Frederick Taylor who defined "with brutal cynicism" this new figure; he argued that the perfect worker under task management organization of labor was nothing more than a "trained gorilla."²¹⁵ This is the result of the process of *abstraction/liquidation* of active, creative components needed in order to carry on that process of serialization, quantification and mechanization needed by the labor process.

The same logic of the machine requires also an iron-like style of life: a "rigorous discipline of the sexual instincts" as well as the "strengthening of the family [...] and of the regulation and stability of sexual relations."²¹⁶ It is here that Gramsci makes his prediction. If with Fordism one witnesses the advent of a process of animalization-mechanization of the human, reduced to his or her pure functionality to

²¹³ Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, 356.

²¹⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 302.

²¹⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 302.

²¹⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 300.

the effectiveness of production, in the relationships between the sexes too, we will also see a return, although “in a different form,” to peasant-like unions.²¹⁷ There will be no room for pursuing new sexual encounters. “The peasant who returns home in the evening after a long and hard day’s work wants the “*venerem facilem parabilemque*.”²¹⁸ This *easy and always available* sexual intercourse is the disenchanted but solid union best suited to the form of production in force.

Gramsci’s description of Fordist family looks like a bleak life between two mechanized entities, but it is rooted in the objectivity of a situation where the rationalization of society encompasses *production* and *reproduction*. As he writes in the first draft of “Rationalization of Production and Work,” “the new method of work and the mode of living are inseparable.”²¹⁹ In a famous passage that many have critiqued, Gramsci describes the objectivity of this two-faceted development.²²⁰ Inside the factory, he says, this transformation is carried out thanks to the “mechanization of the physical gesture” of the worker, whose brain in his or her repetitive activity reaches paradoxically a “state of complete freedom.”²²¹ Outside the factory, this intervention is arranged through a complex of initiatives aimed at maintaining “the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker.”²²² For as I said, it is in the industrialists’ interests to protect their workforce, to take care of their bodies and health, in short of their life.

Gramsci in fact frames sexuality as the proper “economic function of reproduction,” which operates at a *macro*, as well as a *micro* level. As for the latter,

²¹⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 304.

²¹⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 304.

²¹⁹ Gramsci, *Quaderni dal Carcere* CD-ROM.

²²⁰ Among others, see Bruno Trentin, *La città del lavoro. Sinistra e crisi del fordismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), 125-268; Jacques Texier, “Razionalità rispetto allo scopo e razionalità rispetto al valore nei Quaderni del Carcere” *Modern Times Gramsci*, 184-210; Agnes Heller, *The Power of Shame* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976).

²²¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 309.

²²² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 309, 303.

reproduction obviously affects natality rates. Low natality rates, Gramsci notes, provoke a shortage of labor and the need to import it either from the rural areas, or through external immigration. In turn immigration demands a process of “psycho-physical adaptation” for the new workforce and creates continuous changes in class composition. This is one of the “complications” that modern reproduction creates, but it can of course be solved, as I recalled at the beginning of this chapter, through the example of the militarization of Italian industry and its mass mobilization of the war period.

At the micro level, Gramsci argues that an optimal size of population is “not only a general fact,” but also “a molecular fact which operates within the smallest economic units, such as the family.”²²³ The personal desire to have children, he maintains, lays in the need to secure the parents’ life when they are not productive anymore. It is the demonstration of an “instinctive consciousness of the economic need” to have “a certain ratio of young over the entire area of society.”²²⁴ Gramsci’s reflection on the molecular implications of reproduction stops here.

There is a real blind spot in his argumentation however: the consideration of reproduction not merely as procreation but also as maintenance, as the restoration of the physical energies needed to keep the worker in good health. Marx had already clarified that for the worker “the production of labor-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance.”²²⁵ In other terms, production presupposes reproduction and maintenance as the renovation of the workforce. Yet who carries out the work of reproduction? Certainly not the Ford Company inspectors,

²²³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 295.

²²⁴ It is “the stuff of old age” argument, see Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 295.

²²⁵ Or as Marx says later “if then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous conversion of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labor-power must perpetuate himself,” *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>>.

nor the state bureaucrats. The real work of nurturing and providing for the workers' wellness is carried out by women, and it is definitely women who take care of the elders.

The other difficulty in delineating a linear and comprehensive reflection on reproduction is that Gramsci's rhapsody dances around one key element without mentioning it directly: *labor-power*. Reproduction as the creation and renovation of *labor-power*, that is to say not labor itself, but the capacity to work over an agreed amount of time that capital needs in order to function. Gramsci insists on the sanitary/disciplinary apparatus developed by Fordism without postulating the fact that the real objective of this control is the preservation of the present and future capacity to work and thus, as neo-feminism will point out, of the women as the main agent of this work.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is precisely at this point that Gramsci assesses the role of the woman in modern society. Gramsci maintains that "the formation of a new feminine personality is the most important question of an ethical and civil order connected with the sexual question." The woman is trapped into an "absurd position" (Gramsci uses again the term unhealthy characteristics, *caratteri morbosì*) and will not break free, until she will "attain not only a genuine [*reale*] independence in relation to men, but also a new way of conceiving [herself] and [her] role in sexual relations [*rapporti sessuali*]." ²²⁶

This is the most advanced point of Gramsci's reflection on an issue that would become central for the neo-feminist movement of the sixties and seventies. In order to shed light on this issue, I need to introduce a basic philological fact from the *Prison Notebooks*. The critical edition of the *Notebooks* edited by Valentino Gerratana distinguishes between three types of notes. The *a* version is a writing that Gramsci

²²⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 296.

later revised in a final *c* edition, whereas a *b* note is a note he drafted only once. I want to follow in the next paragraphs Raul Mordenti's proposal of taking into account Gramsci's rewriting as a process, its "stratification" as the movement of thought. Mordenti argues that the passage from what in the critical edition edited by Gerratana is the *a* text to the final *c* version reflects a dialectical process of *Aufhebung*, i.e. overcoming or uplifting. In the *Notebooks* the *a* texts are in fact crossed (but not erased) by the author, that is "dialectically up-lifted, not negated or suppressed, but "lifted" [*tolti*] and simultaneously kept in store [*tenuti in serbo*] as it happens in Gramsci's dialectic."²²⁷

The *a* text of "Some aspects of the sexual question" presents a particular case of this movement. The *a* text only states that this situation would not be solved "until women had truly attained an independence in relation to men." The connection between independence and a new "role in sexual relations" in the final version has a wider set of issues, because it redefines independence in the light of a new model of social interaction. Just as "capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things," sexual relations involve a wider subjective dimension and they are not limited to the sexual act in itself.²²⁸ They include the private sphere of physical satisfaction, emotions, but also comportments and habits in the exchanges between the two sexes. At the same time they pertain to the public dimension, for women are the main agents that move the enormous system of relations of reproduction. Independence *with respect* to men is the first distancing move; dialectically it represents the *lifting out* of a condition of subordination that must lead to a positive affirmation through the understanding of one's own positionality ("a new way of conceiving themselves").

²²⁷ Raul Mordenti, *Gramsci e la rivoluzione necessaria* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2007), 158.

²²⁸ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch33.htm>>.

Now the determination of this self-transformative activity is left open to the dialectic between women's capacity to carry out successful forms of struggles and the situation in which they operate. In other words, the translation of the subjective act depends on the critical understanding of the means and ends of the objective situation of reproduction. In this regard the PCd'I will articulate a series of proposals which take as a starting point Gramsci's viewpoints on the issue. I will discuss them in chapter four where I reconstruct the historical context of Italian neo-feminism.

As for translating production into workers' control, the subjective transformation depended instead on the full understanding of the rationalization commanded by Fordism and the Taylorization of production; this issue is crucial given that during the reconstruction after World War II, the Italian left openly supported a Fordist productivist policy, while preaching in the reproductive field also a certain degree of Puritanism. Let us linger first over the issue of Gramsci's presumed Puritanism, and then move on to the Taylorization of production which, as I will show, comes close to the understanding of biopolitics as we know it today.

As with Fordism, Gramsci's movement of thought regarding sexuality has two dimensions, since the establishing of the conditions of possibility demands a punctual analysis that recognizes the objectiveness of the situation. I do not believe there is any moralist purpose behind the description of monogamy as the proper form of the Fordist family. If Gramsci engages in anything it is not morals, but probably ethos: i.e. a set of principles devoid of any metaphysical foundations. Gramsci's reading seems a profoundly a-moral approach to sexuality.²²⁹ The prediction of the Horace-like form of monogamist union does not rely on transcendent principle, it does not state what is

²²⁹ This argument is similar to Marx's a-morality. For Marx it is absurd to think about wage-labor asking the question: is wage-labor right or wrong? One needs to refer it to the modes of production, so that, in a capitalist system, slavery is wrong for it contradicts (it does not conform) its modes of production. Ernesto Sacrepanti, *Comunismo libertario. Marx, Engels e l'economica politica della liberazione* (Roma: manifestolibri, 2007), 47-48.

just, but simply what is more adequate to a certain mode of production. It is not a problem of righteousness (moral), but of adequacy (ethic) with regard to a given system. When I emphasize the descriptive character of the essay, I also implicitly refer to its constitutive a-morality. This is a basic assumption of a philosophy of praxis. It rejects morality as a theoretical guiding principle, just as Freud acknowledges the fact that “it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built upon a renunciation of instinct.”²³⁰ Furthermore the full historicization of human activities requires a total understanding of these practices and their socio-economic reasoning. Thus moral principles have an impact on social life, but only insofar as they are understood as functioning within the logics of a given environment, not as external, universal elements. It is the collective activity of a social block that gives strength and content to the direction of their political prescription. Hence the stress on the subjective self-aware element again.

The refusal of a libertarian ethic on sexuality arises here. Gramsci argues that in Fordism “the sexual function has been mechanized, but in reality we are dealing with the growth of a new form of sexual union shorn of the bright and dazzling color of the romantic tinsel typical of the petit bourgeois and the Bohemian lay-about.” The bright and dazzling colors of natural sexual relationships are the product of a theoretical blockage that the bourgeoisie suffer because of their mutilated existence. As Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, against the relatively closed feudal world, the bourgeois developed a more universal system of interrelations which had also the consequence of alienating the “individual from himself and from others.” Incapable of taking this interconnection to its ultimate stage (a fully human socialization), bourgeoisies resent their own creations and fancy the return to a previous, fuller human type. This *origin* though is a deception. As Marx suggests, “in earlier stages of

²³⁰ Freud, *Civilization*, 97.

development the single individual seems to be developed more fully,” but this only “because he has not yet worked out his relationships in their fullness, or erected them as independent social powers.” Marx concludes that bourgeois’ incapability to go beyond this “antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint” will accompany the bourgeois “up to its blessed end.”²³¹

Our society is still far away from that blessed end. The fact that the supposedly naturalizing power of sexuality is still so central is more proof that we are part of a generalized bourgeois society than the confirmation of Gramsci’s Puritanism. Still there is more. Marx in fact concludes by stating that “the relation of the individual to science may be taken” as an example of this mystification.²³² Technology, just like sexuality, is one branch of those multifaceted relations that humans develop, but fail to universalize and thus rise to their non-oppressive form. Their potential universalizing force is reduced to a partiality, unrecognizable from its scope and use. Failing to gain access to its universal potential, humans became estranged from their own creation and among themselves. Bourgeois escapism works its way through this alienation, supplying a release valve, a promise of plentitude that does not exist. The real antithesis to this partiality can be worked out only by the proletariat. Yet this can happen only if the workers embrace a general vision of the direction for the new form of production, overcoming the desire to do away with it (the luddites’ response), and thus rejecting any kind of escapism; that is to say only if they are able to develop, on

²³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 1, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch03.htm>>. This is caused by what Marx called estranged labor, that is, the expropriation of men’s activity. Given that through production “nature appears as *his* [men’s] work and his reality [...] the object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of the species-life of man: for man produces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created. In tearing away the object of his production from man, estranged labor therefore tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity,” *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Manuscript 1, ed. Martin Mulligan, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>>.

²³² Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 1, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch03.htm>>.

the basis of their present condition, a new knowledge of work and the social interactions between individuals as something fully human, as something serving the purpose of a multitude of people and not a privileged minority.

In conclusion, Gramsci's rejection of libertinism as a path towards liberation does not entail the endorsement of a repressive, puritanical model. It is a description and simultaneously a hypothesis which must be connected to his thesis on the liberation of the Taylorized (mechanized) worker. As the feminists of the sixties will make clear, a *liberalization* of sexuality alone does not engender a real liberation, for the marks of oppression at an economic and social level can easily control a higher accessibility to sexual intercourse. The first steps in this sense will be taken by others, for instance Camilla Ravera, who worked together with Gramsci at *L'Ordine Nuovo* and under his supervision will begin to look at reproduction as unpaid labor. In an age of scarcity, the supremacy of the paradigm of production prevented Gramsci and his comrades to discover the centrality of reproduction as a factor of growth and thus of biopolitics. Sexuality thus suffers this under-theorization which finds very concrete causes in the historical situation in which Gramsci was living.

On the contrary, when it comes to the analysis of production, Gramsci is able to arrive directly at the threshold of the future biopolitical nature of labor. Let us see how. First, Gramsci criticizes a certain misapplication of Fordism. He notes that in Europe the establishment of this collective apparatus for the administration of life was far less developed than in the United States. On the one hand, the individuals had not properly realized the psycho-physical demands that the new mode of production set forward. Gramsci says that "we Europeans are still too bohemian; we believe that we can do a certain kind of work and live as we please."²³³ This work instead required a careful expenditure of physical, muscular and mental energies as well as a social

²³³ Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, 356.

system that supports and preserves these energies. On the other side, because of the backwardness of the industrialists and the parasitic nature especially of Italian bourgeoisies, the kind of Fordism that was applied failed to comply with the apparatus (what today we call “welfare state”) needed in order to make up for such a boost in the rhythms of production.

Gramsci ironically remarks that “Europe would like to have a full barrel and a drunken wife,” which is to say enjoy “all the benefits” which Fordism brings and, at the same time “retaining its army of parasites who, by consuming vast sums of surplus-value, aggravate initial costs and reduce competitive power” of the factories.²³⁴ This is another instance of a demographic unbalance that must be regulated in order to avoid catastrophic consequences. Fordism and its apparatus are progressive factors to the extent that they provide an improvement in the standard of living, and in so far as they supersede those feudal forms of privileges of unproductive sectors of society.

The exemplarity of Fordism is further developed in four other paragraphs. In “Animality and Industrialism” Gramsci sees the contrast between rationalization and instinctuality and the subjection of the latter due to the “dominion of one social group over all the productive forces of society.”²³⁵ A promiscuous and frenetic sexual life is once again criticized for it drains energies and time from the restoration of labor-power. The irregular life of war-time clashed with the new system of production that was gaining ground. Only a class, self-imposed discipline can avoid a material degradation of the workforce. The case study here is Soviet Russia, which Gramsci addresses under the long periphrasis as “a state where the working masses are no

²³⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 281.

²³⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 298.

longer subject to coercive pressure from a superior class.”²³⁶ The problem is still the kind of self-imposed discipline to be singled out.

The paragraph “Rationalization of Production and Work” proposes two case studies, both of them negative. Gramsci condemns Trotsky 1920 plan of militarizing industry, because even if “the preoccupations were correct,” unfortunately “the practical solutions were profoundly mistaken.”²³⁷ The second example is Fordism which seems to function better, carefully mixing repression and persuasion – here the emphasis is on high wages. However Fordism too is starting to show signs of decline with the resurgence of parasitism in the high strata of society. These phenomena, Gramsci argues, “are determining a psychological split and accelerating the crystallization and saturation of the various social groups, thereby making evident the way that these groups are being transformed into castes just as they have been in Europe.”²³⁸ Here again it is the one-sidedness of this discipline that determines its oppressive character.

With “Taylorism and the Mechanization of the Worker,” the figurality of Fordism is finally chiseled out. The mechanization of the worker is illustrated through a very special kind of laborer, the medieval copyist and its evolution, the modern typographer. Both workers increase their efficiency as they detach themselves from the content of their reproduction, in short as they eliminate any subjective input in their copying. Both examples are cases of immaterial labor whose product is communication. The association of the copyist and the typographer with the worker operating in an assembly line is certainly too abrupt and lacks the formulation of the necessary points of connections. Yet if we grant Gramsci certain flexibility in his association, I believe the use of this immaterial labor process can sketch a positive

²³⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 300.

²³⁷ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 301.

²³⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 306.

realization of Taylorism. Both figures fulfill their positive pre-figuration in two distinctive elements. First their mechanization is a form of abstraction which passes from a subjective, conscious activity to a psycho-physical ability, which is active at the corporeal level of the worker. Secondly, both jobs create as their output communication which entails a totalizing production and consumption, i.e. goods that satisfy collective needs.

Here Gramsci is unbelievably close to grasping a contemporary biopolitical capacity, even though he is using Fordist conceptual equipment, which is to say one that is typical of an age of scarcity where mechanical production needs to be implemented to cover basic needs. Only Marx in the *Grundrisse* had the same awareness. Gramsci envisioned a supersession of the purely mechanical coercion of Fordism through the process of abstraction of labor. Its progressive purification from mechanical limitation happens via the rooting it in the “muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker” of labor-power as such.²³⁹

Fordism, Gramsci says, will be “superseded by the creation of a psycho-physical nexus of a new type, both different from its predecessors and undoubtedly *superior*.” This is the pre-figuration of *labor-power qua* potentiality that will manifest itself only within a post-Fordist society. In a mechanical age in fact, labor-power vanishes as soon as it is transformed into work, for a capacity is the multifaceted ability to do something and not its practical execution. This is the paradox of the category of labor-power. The capitalist does not buy *something* but an “undetermined potential: where one particular type of labor or another has not been designated, but any kind of labor is taking place, be it the manufacturing of the car door, or the harvesting of pears [...] or the work of the proofreader.”²⁴⁰ When this ensemble of

²³⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 302.

²⁴⁰ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004), 81.

human capacities are not separated anymore but intertwined, immanent to the mere potentiality of the body, we reach a form of immateriality that is concrete without being definite, constituent without being constricting. The *superiority* of this new form of labor is the *translation* of the *virtuality* of the Councils Movement within the limits of a Fordist society. Gramsci could not define it precisely, because the mechanic/material element of production was still the touchstone of what is considered productive labor. But the totality of the capacities involved in a communicative/linguistic production refers indeed to the immaterial labor typical of post-Fordist economies. Still the stress on the physical acquisition of the work can only go so far in expressing the concept of labor-power *qua* potentiality, i.e. biopolitics. As Paolo Virno argues, “only in today’s world [...] can the notion of labor-power not be reduced (as it was in the time of Gramsci) to an aggregate of physical and mechanical attributes; now, instead, it encompasses within itself, and rightfully so, the ‘life of the mind’.”²⁴¹

Gramsci also stresses workers’ centrality in this process of virtualization: Fordism represents a coercive imposition, “external and mechanical, but it can become internalized if it is proposed by the worker himself [...], by a new form of society, with appropriate and original methods.” In this sense even the remark about the worker who “far from being mummified, reaches a state of complete freedom” can be cleared of its repressive and objectivist residue and *translated* into its practical subjective meaning. The mind “free and unencumbered for other occupation” that Gramsci’s sketches must not be misunderstood for the empirical freeing of the individual, the beautiful soul who can now speculative about life.²⁴² It is the

²⁴¹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 81.

²⁴² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 309. It has been argued, and with good reason, that this wording could be a secret “reference to the fact that the working class and the communist party resist notwithstanding the industrialists’ attempts to subject and subdue them,” see Catone, “Americanismo come modo di produzione,” *Modern Times Gramsci*, 63.

collective, organic understanding of the structural contradictions and the social interconnections of the new phase of production that enables a revolutionary subject to rise up to a more fully human level.²⁴³ Following Marx, Gramsci suggests that “an increasingly perfect division of labor objectively reduces the position of the factory worker,” but at the same time “work that is concerted and well organized gives a better “social” productivity, so that the entire work-force of a factory should see itself as a collective worker.” This entails conceiving technology “not merely separately from the interests of the ruling class, but in relation to the interests of the class which is as yet still subaltern.”²⁴⁴

In order to imagine this new dimension, where biopolitics is not denoted by an oppressive character, one would need to start imagining a technology, a science liberated from the logic of profit. It would be a socialist modernization (quite different from the ones we came to know) which Gramsci cannot clearly pin down, but knows has to grow out from the modernity that Fordism generated. This task was assigned to the proletariat. As Gramsci noted in the final passages of Notebook 22, the re-direction of the system is expected “from those on whom is imposed the burden of creating with their own suffering the material bases of the new order. It is them who “must” find for themselves an “original,” and not Americanized, system of living, to turn into “freedom,” what today is “necessity.”²⁴⁵

This necessity became in fact the terrain of the new battle. “A quantitative conception of exploitation allows the gathering of great masses in the revolutionary

²⁴³ See also Catone, “Americanismo come modo di produzione” *Modern Times Gramsci*, 64 and Baratta, “Antonio Gramsci critico dell’americanismo,” *Modern times Gramsci*, 34-37.

²⁴⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 202. Against the repressive, objectivist hypothesis, Andrea Catone had rightly pointed out that it would be impossible to think that “a revolutionary who reclaimed worker’s subjectivity as the key element in opposing the mechanistic determinism of the Second international” would support a form of blatant mechanization, even if disguised as progressive Taylorization. Catone, “Americanismo come modo di produzione,” *Modern Times Gramsci*, 66.

²⁴⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 317.

struggle over wages,” and three mass-subjects emerged fueling a new cycle of struggles.²⁴⁶ From the Fordist factory emerged the *mass-worker*, who had started to revolt in the 1950s when the new automation system was fully applied. From the fight against authoritarianism and a class oriented mass school system the *students* lead a first insurrection during the may of 1968, joining the workers in the fall of the same year. The third subject that cut across the other two, but stood out in its full autonomy was the *woman*.

²⁴⁶ Antonio Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser,” *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory*, Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio, eds., (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 52.

CHAPTER 2

PASOLINI AND 1968: LIFE AND NECESSARY DEATH

Feelings cannot change: they are historical. It is what one feels that it is true (in spite of all the insincerities we may have within us). In the end. – that is today, at the beginning of 1975 – my feeling, I repeat, is one of condemnation.

(P. P Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*)

2.1 Pasolini, the Student Movement and the New National Character of the Italian People

There is a historical gap between the bulk of knowledge and experiences elaborated during Gramsci's times and the next cycle of struggle brought about by 1968. This cycle and its critique by a fellow traveler such as Pier Paolo Pasolini is the subject of the following pages. In between there was of course a Fascist dictatorship, a World War and more than a decade of reconstruction of the economic and social infrastructures of the country that do not fall under my direct investigation. Part of the reason for this temporal jump is that it is in the nature of social struggles to pop up suddenly after a long period of incubation; another reason is that I am not interested in a mere chronological account of events. I am attempting rather a reconstruction of a cultural genealogy of the moments where the biopolitical element comes to the forefront. What I want to investigate is the upsurge of new forms of life, the knowledge it generates and how these experiments later get incorporated and normalized. To be sure, in the collective narrative of the building of national identity, the Resistance represents a foundational moment. I am not arguing against it, but I find the exceptionality of armed struggle marginal or not directly connected to the development of the biopolitical discourse.

My narrative is, however, not as discontinuous as it might seem at a first glance. The pivotal moments I investigate contain also the residues of what came before. Their long incubation represents precisely the historical working out of their emergence. Thus fascism, Resistance and reconstruction appear several times in my discussion, only they are not assessed autonomously, but rather in relation to the use that 1968 makes of them. In general, we can say that fascism and the war of liberation against it played a fundamental, symbolic role. In revitalizing a new wave of anti-fascism, the 1968 Student Movement appropriated in fact at least a specific element of

this collective memory, that of the missed revolution, or the unfinished revolution, and often used it to critique the institutional left.¹ A famous song by Ivan Della Mea bluntly makes this point:

During the days of the fight
Red was my color
But now that I celebrate
I carry the tricolor [*Tricolore*]
[...]
What songs and joy
And cheering, and bangs
Here is Longo, here is Parri
And here even Andreotti.
And here is my boss
Who fired me
That dirty capitalist
He too carrying the Tricolor.²

¹ The origins of the Student Movement are difficult to trace. There were national organizations of students such as the left-wing *Unione Goliardica Italiana* [Italian Undergraduate Union] or the fascist *Fronte Universitarion Azione Nazionle* [National Front of Univerisity Action]. But, as always in Italian history, the regional context played a big role, so the Movement grew out the militancy of various organizations, groups and youth branches of the major political parties. As the protests increased in strength in the spring and fall of 1968, the Movement started to organize itself at a national level. As we will see, the group of *Lotta Continua* was probably the political organization with the greatest following. On the origins of the Student Movement see *Adriano Sofri, il '68 e il Potere operaio pisano* (Bolsena: Massari editore, 1998); Capanna Mario, *Movimento Studentesco, crescita politica e azione rivoluzionaria* (Edizioni Sapere: Milano, 1968); Jacopo Fo, *'68, c'era una volta la rivoluzione: i dieci anni che sconvolsero il mondo* (Milano : Feltrinelli, 1997); Alberto De Bernardi and Marcello Flores, *Il Sessantotto* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998); Guido Viale, *Il 68: tra rivoluzione e conservazione* (Rimini: Nda press, 2008). For audiovisual material see also the website *Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico*, 2007, <<http://aamod.archiviolucente.com/archiviolucente/aamod/>>.

² Ivan Della Mea, "Nove Maggio," *La mia vita ormai*. Dischi del Sole 43, 1965. This common understanding is echoed by the editorial of the 1962 issue of the magazine *Quaderni Piacentini* that stated "after seventeen years of quarantine the Resistance has been approved (*promossa*)" and is now celebrated by "professional antifascists" and "fascists" together *qua* the political leading class.

Ivan Della Mea composed *Nove Maggio* (May 9) in the wake of the twentieth anniversary of the liberation in Milan when the political leadership of the country came together to celebrate the event. *Nove Maggio* scorned this unitary attempt to domesticate the armed struggle and its revolutionary potential. Having partisans and living icons of the Resistance like Ferruccio Parri (1890-1981), Italy's first prime minister, and Luigi Longo (1900-1980) with Togliatti one of the most important leaders of the Italian Communist Party (henceforward PCI), shake hands with Giulio Andreotti meant for the new generation that the official left had sold out. Under the national flag of the Tricolor and independently from their ideologies, the political apparatus had agreed to support capitalism against the proletarian class struggle. The new generations of 1968 invested highly in the symbolic value of the Resistance and, probably going beyond its real historical dimension, reformulated its collective memory in terms of a revolution that was not fully carried out by the left.³ To this symbolic shift and its consequences I will dedicate part of my discussion.

I would like to introduce 1968 by addressing the work of an intellectual who did not participate in it, but who represents a critical-counter point for the ideas that this event produced and divulged. Pier Paolo Pasolini was probably the most famous leftist intellectual who openly criticized the Student Movement. Even though he occasionally collaborated with them, Pasolini was not shy about accusing the neo-Marxism of political groups such as *Potere Operaio* (Worker's Power) and *Lotta*

Gianpasquale Santomassimo, "La memoria pubblica dell'antifascismo," *L'Italia Repubblicana nella crisi degli anni settanta. Culture, nuovi soggetti, identità*, Fiamma Lussana and Giacomo Marramao, eds., vol. 2, (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2003), 160.

³ The confrontations in Genoa and Reggio Emilia between young workers and the police in July 1960 were the first instance of this transformation. These young people who had not taken part in the Resistance, but had close direct memory of it came to be known as the *giovani con le magliette a strisce* [stripe t-shirts youths]. See Diego Colombo, *L'estate delle magliette a strisce. Luglio 1960, la rivolta contro Tambroni* (Milano: Scriba Studio, 2008); Philip Cooke, *Luglio 1960: Tambroni e la repressione fallita* (Milano: Teti, 2000); *Quarant'anni fa: lo scontro politico del luglio 60'. L'estate dei Tambroni. I ragazzi con le maglie a strisce*, Franco Bojardi, ed., spec. issue of *Ricerche Storiche* 95 (2003): 9.

Continua (Continuous Struggle, henceforward LC) of a belated return to Marxism.⁴

Yet the peak of the controversy between him and the Movement originated after March 1, 1968, when a confrontation between police and students exhibited for the first time a qualitative leap in the Movement's strength. If as I mentioned in the previous chapter, workers had a long, and at times, victorious tradition of struggle, students on the contrary could never really hold off, let alone, check the police. However, that day, near the Faculty of Architecture in Rome, for the first time, when confronted by the police the students did not run, but fought back, eventually taking temporary possession of the university buildings protected by a considerable number of troops. These incidents became known as the battle of Valle Giulia, from the name of the neighborhood on the side of the Parioli hills.⁵

Writing for the most important Italian bourgeois newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*, Pasolini responded with a provocative poem that sparked a heated debate. The poem *Il PCI ai giovani!!* (The PCI to the Young!!) is direct and most concise in its wording. It bluntly states:

When yesterday at Valle Giulia you fought
with policemen,
I sympathized with the policemen.
Because policemen are the children of the poor.

⁴ See Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 37-38 and *Scritti corsari* (Milano: Garzanti, 1975), 196. Pasolini cooperated in the shooting of a political movie like *12 Dicembre* (1972) that was put up and distributed by *Lotta Continua*; in the spring of 1972 served also as director of their magazine. See Laura Betti and Michele Gulinucci, eds., *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Le regole di un'illusione* (Roma: Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1991), 347; Nico Naldini, *Chronology, Pier Paolo Pasolini tutte le opere*, Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli, eds., vol. 1 (Milano: Mondadori, 2001), cvi-cvii.

⁵ See Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Giampaolo Bultrini and Scialoja Mario, "La battaglia di Valle Giulia," *L'Espresso*, 10 March 1968.

Because of the populist equation between poverty and righteousness, these apologetic lines were immediately attacked by the Movement's leaders. Young militants like Vittorio Foa for instance, argued that Pasolini did not grasp the transformation of the Italian working class and had a static, romantic idea of workers. Later on others instead praised the accuracy of Pasolini's insights.⁶ Yet, these lines should be read in connection with the description of the students:

You are scared, uncertain, desperate
(very good!) but you also know how to be
bullies, blackmailers, and sure of yourselves;
petit-bourgeois prerogatives, friends.⁷

Pasolini is pointing to something deeper than the claim of the students' fake revolutionary ideas, or their being bourgeois disguised as proletarian agitators. The use of the term "prerogatives" gestures towards larger social patterns, like the social conditionings that were putting down roots in his contemporary society and determining a new form of political life. Later on, Pasolini explained his point of view as follows:

Because the bourgeoisie is triumphing, it is transforming
both the workers and the ex-colonial peasants into
bourgeois. In short, through neocapitalism the

⁶ See the Round Table organized by the journal *L'Espresso* in 1968, now in *pasolini.net*, <http://www.pasolini.net/saggistica_tavolarotondaEspresso.htm>; for an account of the debate see also Andrea Pera, "Borghesia, Rivoluzione, Potere: il '68 nel teatro di Pier Paolo Pasolini," *Carte Italiane* 4 (2008): 16-45; on the student revolt as a bourgeois struggle see William Van Watson, *Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Theatre of the World* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 13.

⁷ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 150.

bourgeoisie is becoming the human condition. Those who are born into this entropy cannot in any way, metaphysically, be outside of it. It's over. For this I provoke the young. They are, presumably, the last generation which sees workers and peasants; the next generation will only see bourgeois entropy around it.⁸

A new term that became fashionable in the sixties describing the expansion of large national corporations, state intervention and mass consumption, neocapitalism represents for Pasolini the overreaching force that is subsuming the minds and bodies of the new Italian generations.⁹ This process of rationalization transformed the whole of the social infrastructure of the country. Pasolini carried out the analysis of these processes in a series of newspapers articles, most notably in the *Corriere della Sera*, later reunited under the title *Scritti corsari* (1975) and in his last writings, *Lutheran Letters*, which were published posthumously in 1976.

In these essays the poet and filmmaker argues that the cultural mutation brought about by neocapitalism thanks to communication (television) and public infrastructures for the circulation of motor vehicles was so deep and powerful as to determine the first true unification of the Italian people.¹⁰ It was obviously a unification imposed and not willed by those who were subjected to it, a unification that was grafted on the peculiar anomaly of the Italian history – that is to say on the lack of a precedent socio-political homogenization, since the country never really

⁸ Pasolini, 156.

⁹ On the transformations of economy that gave rise to neocapitalism see Ernest Mandel, "Workers under Neocapitalism," *Marxiste*, <http://marxsite.com/workers_under_neocapitalism.htm>; Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital. An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966); John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967) and *The affluent society* (Boston: Mifflin, 1958).

¹⁰ See *Scritti corsari*, 32 and *Lutheran Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), 63-67.

underwent a process of unification as others did through a centralized monarchy, or a bourgeois revolution.¹¹ Neocapitalism represented for Pasolini a non-coercive transformation of social practices, a passive reshaping of forms of life that altered society at an anthropological level. As I soon show, this also coincides with what Gramsci called a *passive revolution*.

With his broad range of interests and multifaceted activity as poet, essayist and film director, Pasolini represents an unmatched attempt to analyze and critique the passive revolution of neocapitalism in all its tentacular dimensions. In particular, he is crucial in pinning down the connection between the process of emancipation and the hedonism of consumerism as constitutive of the new social practices that students, workers and women were generating. Pasolini is thus a powerful magnifying glass to study the transformations and the contradictions that Italian 1968 brought about.

Yet we need to be aware that there is a fundamental difference between his understanding of the emergence of political subjectivities, their relation with the power system, and that of the Student Movement. When it comes to the study of their nature, Pasolini shows a profound pessimism. The affirmation of these new subjectivities for him falls directly within the framework of a further exploitation and oppression. They are part of the accumulation of capital and its process of commodification of human relations. Unfortunately, when Pasolini states that “the student revolt was born overnight,” and that “there were not any real objective reasons” for it, he misses the fact that this desire for the revolution was based on embryonic social changes occurring in society while Fordism was blocking them.¹²

Moreover, Pasolini shows no interest for the question of labor-power. He seems to rely on an understanding of production based exclusively on labor whereas

¹¹ *Pier Paolo Pasolini e la ragione di un sogno*, Dir. Laura Betti. Palomar, 2001.

¹² Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 37.

capitalist relations of production are founded on wage-labor as the partial payment of a *capacity to work*. In other words wage-labor is not defined by the compensation for a fixed amount of labor, but by a capacity to perform multiple tasks. In Pasolini, overlooking the centrality of labor-power produces a static and generally passive understanding of class struggle. Subjectivities are simply understood as dominated by production. They are not active agents who, while under capital domination, contribute to the changing of production through their actions. Hence the impossibility to talk about biopolitics in Pasolini, despite the centrality of the thematic of the body and life in his work.¹³ Pasolini's vitalism is certainly not metaphysical, since the attention to the historical determination of life in given societies is a distinct trait of his thought; still the absence of the concept of labor-power in his reflection prevents our endeavor to search for a biopolitical dimension of social practices.

Because of this blind spot in his understanding of the events of 1968, which I frame as a moment of creation and empowering of the biopolitical element, Pasolini departs from a materialist analysis of reality and enters an ambiguously moral realm, in which, as Wallace P. Sillanpoa argued, "capitalist society" becomes a "*malum* to be rejected *tout court* in the name of a purer (pre-industrial) one threatened with extinction."¹⁴ Against the "total embourgeoisement" of society the only solution available for him is the "conservation of all forms of culture."¹⁵ The preservation of alterity, not just as culture, but also as social systems (even feudal ones), is Pasolini's response to the processes of modernization that were changing Italy's face. Now, regardless of the soundness and a-historical nature of this argument, in the next pages I will use Pasolini's critique of the Student Movement and neocapitalism as a way to

¹³ One needs to mention only the famous trilogy of life: *Decameron* (1970-71), *Canterbury Tales* (1971-72), *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (1973-74).

¹⁴ Wallace Sillanpoa, "Pasolini's Gramsci," *MLN* 1 (1981): 131.

¹⁵ Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 124, 125.

think about production and reproduction in the context of the Italian modernization and its new forms of subjectivities. As I will argue in my conclusion, the radical negativity of Pasolini's reflection becomes useful to engender thought in difference. Finally, I will show how Pasolini's apparently conservative position on abortion, once corrected through his own category of *necessary death*, meets some of the ideas of the Student Movement, especially its neo-feminist avant-garde, and becomes the starting point for a theory that recognizes the biopolitical capacities of labor, but that simultaneously directs them toward a common goal. The deepest pessimism of Pasolini can potentially become the reason for a positive affirmation of a new collective life.

The Language of Things

By the mid 1960s the modernization of Italy was reaching its peak. The signs were clear in the changing of the standards of consumption, education and production (the latter grew 10, 1% per year). But as many intellectuals were pointing out, this model of development was also bringing about social degradation. The focus of these engaged intellectuals became thus the study of the processes at work in Italian society, particularly the critique of the outcome that a massive amount of commercial goods that was flooding the market generated. In a 1960 essay, titled "*Il mare dell'oggettività*," Italo Calvino wrote that the sea of objectivity, i.e. the commodification of social relations brought forward by capitalism, was submerging the subject, neutralizing its capacity to act upon reality and pushing it toward an alarming passivity.¹⁶ On the opposite side of the literary field, the neo-avant-garde of *Gruppo 63*, with which Pasolini strenuously debated, similarly confronted this

¹⁶ "Il mare dell'oggettività," *Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società* (Torino Einaudi, 1980), 39-45.

situation and focused on the demystification of the ideology of progress and modernization through linguistic experimentalism.¹⁷

Pasolini developed his critique of commodification through what he called the examination of the language of things. To do so he chose the form of a philosophical tale like Voltaire's *Candide: or, Optimism* (1759). Unfortunately Pasolini's treaty, *Gennariello*, remained unfinished, but since the main ideas are clearly sketched out, we can use them as a starting point for our discussion. Pasolini addresses his teaching to a young Napolitan boy, Genariello, a new Candide who needs to be rescued by the ideology of development and consumerism that was erasing any trace of contradiction, any possible discrepancy or social difference, with its powerful optimism. Pasolini thus sets out to explore analytically the non-verbal language of commodities in which Gennariello has been raised. When I say commodities I do not just mean items sold and consumed, but also social spaces, like urban or suburban environments. Pasolini's analysis of the language of things is built on a careful selection of these elements and the patient explanation of the dynamics that lie behind it.

I will begin by assessing commodities *qua* things, goods to be consumed, and then pass to the commodification of the social space. As for commodities, Pasolini's argument is based on the hidden assumption that goods are the modern embodiment of a classical rhetorical figure: *prosopopoeia*, or a personification. Why did Pasolini pick such an improbable figure to talk about consumerism? The first answer is that Pasolini is quoting Marx's famous passage on commodity fetishism where he says "could commodities themselves speak, they would say: our use value may be a thing that interests men."¹⁸ Yet, prosopopoeias are not as fictitious as they seem or, which is the same, their fiction produces effects which are quite concrete and disconcerting.

¹⁷ See Angelo Guglielmi, *Avanguardia e sperimentalismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1977), 55.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>>.

Consider Etruscan vases for instance, most of them bear inscriptions that *make them speak*. They usually announce the name of their owners and do so in the first singular person; they state for instance: “I belong to Avile Repesuna.”¹⁹

Now, there is a very uncanny feeling in confronting the sentence of an *object* that speaks as if it were a human *subject*: I am the property of... and so on. The full articulation of the potential of a prosopopoeia is precisely in the unsettling power of a *talking thing* because, as Slavoj Žižek writes, in this case one is confronted with “the shocking emergence of a word where one would not expect it.”²⁰ Pasolini exploits this uncanny effect and takes it to its most nightmarish consequences: that of a object that is not *made* to speak in observance of the will of a human subject, but that now speaks autonomously and, what’s more, expressing fundamental truths regarding contemporary society.

Thus objects speak; they articulate a discourse that influences the masses so that they become true “pedagogical sources” for Gennariello.²¹ They spell out the social relations that dominate contemporary society since they act as active elements in the mediation and communication among consumers. At the same time though, they also mark the unbridgeable gap between Gennariello’s generation and the previous ones. To clarify the point, Pasolini recalls a circumstance related to the staging of his last movie *Salò* that involved teacups.

My set-designer, Dante Ferretti [...] had found a very
precious tea-set, [...] the cups were bright egg-yellow
with white raised spots. Related as they were to the world

¹⁹ This particular example comes from a drinking-cup (*kantharos*) held in the British Museum which dates back to 600 BC.

²⁰ *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 171.

²¹ Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 26.

of the Bauhaus and the air-raid shelters, they were deeply moving [...] Yet these cups had about them a mysterious quality which was shared incidentally by the furniture, the carpets, the ladies' clothes and hats, the furnishing and even the wallpaper. [...] This mysterious quality was that of their workmanship. Up to the fifties and into the first years of the sixties that is how it was. Things were still made or put together by human hands [...] and they were things with a human – that is to say, personal – destination.²²

The mechanization of production erases the previous goal-oriented nature of goods and liberates them. Having overcome their original function of satisfying basic human needs, commodities are now free from their anchorage to a material referent and assert themselves as autonomous objects. They are prosopopoeias that do not stand for something else; they do not need any sort of anthropomorphic resemblance. For if it is the object that has conquered the subject, as Calvino said, it is the former that most truly incarnates the new subject. These goods are so charged with their consumerist message that they become autonomous entities speaking for themselves.

To recapitulate: the pedagogical truth that the language of modern things contains rests for Pasolini in the suspension of the link between goods and human needs, and thus in the emancipation of commodities as symbolic, free entities.²³ As he argues “the gap between the consumerist world and the paleo-industrial world is still wider and more total than the gap between the paleo-industrial one and the pre-

²² Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 34.

²³ The a-referentiality of commodities had been already assessed by Guy Debord in his ground breaking work *The Society of Spectacle* (1967) and Jean Baudrillard *The System of Objects* (1968).

industrial one. The latter in fact has only today been finally superseded – abolished, destroyed.”²⁴ In this older phase, goods were of course still “mystified, falsified, made horrendous at the level of power,” yet “they remained real at the level of the power-dominated world.”²⁵ It is only with the advanced mechanization of Fordism that their reproducibility shredded the bond with the uniqueness and *thingness* of the objects and the latter become progressively immaterial, more volatile and versatile just like language. Hence Pasolini’s linguistic representation of commodities *qua* linguistic tropes (prosopopoeias).

That said, certain contemporary readings of Pasolini as the forerunner of post-structuralist poetics must be reframed in light of his firm condemnation of the commodity’s break from referentiality. Gesturing toward Julia Kristeva’s work, Francesca Cadel argues, for example, that Pasolini’s linguistic idea is that of the “signifier as such.”²⁶ Cadel’s analysis originates from Pasolini’s last poetic production that I do not investigate here, and which is certainly flexible enough to sustain Post-structural readings. But she also contends that this posture informs Pasolini’s philosophy in general. Yet, even if Pasolini registers this condition, and attempts to explain its causes, he certainly does not embrace it as an emancipative poetics. When he talks about language for instance, he summons up a *quasi* referential notion of the sign, as he argues that language “is not an arbitrary abstraction, but a coherent physical whole of necessary signs.” Signs become “arbitrary afterwards, in the moment in which the purely phonic language [...] begins to become potentially also a

²⁴ Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 34.

²⁵ Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 35.

²⁶ See Francesca Cadel, *La lingua dei desideri. Il dialetto secondo Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Lecce: Manni, 2002), 147. I believe that even Pasolini’s idea of poetic expressiveness against the communicative use of language should not be misunderstood for a post-structuralist concept of meaning. The defence of a deeply humanist content of language is a constant feature of Pasolini’s polemics. See his discussion of the linguistic problem in *Heretical Empiricism*, 46-48.

written language; that is, the language of a culture.”²⁷ Moreover, the expressiveness of language, which Pasolini praises, cannot be confused with the constitutive indeterminateness of postmodern poetics. As an essential moment of expression of still vital and natural energy, poetry is furthermore a weapon against the reification and quantification of the real. It is that intensity that breaks away from capital abstraction and equalization in which the qualitative difference of things is subsumed in a mere quantitative one. In a nutshell, his anchorage to a referent (even if not immediate), his being a poet “who is not satisfied with a cognitive act but wishes to have direct experience of the magma,” and a Marxist, “who is not satisfied with knowing and describing a geometry of reality that is, but wishes to bring order to it, both in knowledge and action,” invalidates a hidden postmodern source for Pasolini’s theory.²⁸

Finally, the notion of a ubiquitous free-floating signifier is the stamp impressed by consumer culture on things which, as we will see, for Pasolini led directly towards a new and more powerful form of fascism. The ideology consumer culture fosters is connected for Pasolini to the “wave of formalism and empiricism of the great European neocapitalist renaissance,” and to the French avant-gardes of the 60s like the *École du regard* or the *Tel Quel* group that have been considered the forefathers of Post-structuralism.²⁹ But apart from these genealogies of postmodernism, the real breach between the materiality of reality and the new immaterial linguistic nature of commodities is precisely what Pasolini underscores in his treatise and the lesson

²⁷ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 68.

²⁸ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 74. I believe my position coincides also with Maurizio Viano’s idea of a “certain realism” that Pasolini coined for his cinema. That is to say not a naïve belief in the direct representation of reality, but in the performative quality of this realism that would put “spectators in the position of asking themselves questions about reality.” *A Certain Realism. Making Use of Pasolini’s Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), x; see also Noa Steimatsky, *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 136-137.

²⁹ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 74.

Gennariello needs to learn, even if he is already fully immersed into this mode of living. This is the radical difference that produces a generational gap between those who lived in a paleo-industrial world and those who grew up today. Pasolini regrets this condition and laments the estrangement between the new generation and his own. In a nutshell, Pasolini is still a modern intellectual who, attempting to think through an incipient post-modern society, mourns the past and a radical alterity to modernity.

When discussing urban space, Pasolini's analysis reaches a remarkable level of clairvoyance. The remarks on the city of Bologna are furthermore prophetic of the turmoil that were to shake the regional capital of Emilia Romagna only two years later. The contradiction that Pasolini points out, perhaps without clearly resolving it, is that Bologna lives off a false reconciliation. The local communist government embraced a managerial logic that stresses efficiency, social peace and higher standards of living for the proletariat. One can argue that in Bologna, as well as in a handful of other towns of the centre north of Italy, the true reformist program of the PCI was fully developed and applied starting from the end of World War II. Yet these local governments also disclosed their inner weakness with regard to a real anti-capitalist project, that is, with of a new form of life that promotes social progress, and not merely quantitative growth (i.e. development). Pasolini rightly points out that Bologna represents a laboratory for "a possible and improbable Italian city of the future." But he also foresees that the two "blessings: wealth and a Communist administration," that characterize this political experiment "create a democratic optimism" which is in fact totalitarian. This is what the prosopopoeia of Bologna utters: "as I am both a developed and a Communist city I am not only a city where there is no alternative, but I am also a place where there is no alterity." It is the reduction to the same cycle of production and consumption that obliterates any difference and agency of subjectivities. Bologna is a perfect mechanism that translates "the development of

transnational consumerism” into the reality of a “Communist regional governing body.”³⁰ Furthermore, according to Pasolini the homogenizing of the natural space under this apparent positive apparatus is threatening at a social but also at an ecological level.

The process of valorization that the municipality put in motion relies indeed on a kind of economic development that brings together two opposite elements. On the one hand, it follows a classical capitalist system of production based on the extraction of surplus-labor. On the other, it camouflages the exploitation with a set of social mitigations: programs of redistribution of wealth, a solid network of services supporting the lower strata, and furnishing essential services for the community such as collectively owned firms for public transportation, water management, and cooperatives which fostered the idea of collective management and solidarity against that of profit making. All this was producing a social value that mitigated a still capitalist based society. In time though, and one can see it clearly today, even this positive value would eventually be turned into profit, and the social progress of these experiments sold as any other commodity. This complex social infrastructure had advantages, that of a minimal level of class conflict, cooperatives for instance usually functioned as mitigating devices, and that of a high level of efficiency reached, not through the imposition of the rationalization of production, but through the commitment of workers who were also members of the communities benefiting from those same product/services they produced. The high efficiency of this apparatus and the positive image built on its social mission came in handy when local governments decided it was time to privatize and make profits.

Today it is easy to see how the production of concrete values in terms of social needs served the purpose of stimulating a process of economic valorization that was

³⁰ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 38.

originally public and social. The very halo that still today surrounds the efficiency of the so called “red regions,” like Emilia Romagna or Tuscany, their fame as political laboratories of a future sustainable capitalism, is part of that production of value that was progressively expropriated from the collective and sold as a commodity. In this sense, Pasolini is absolutely right in highlighting the futuristic quality of these social experiments. They were not, as the communist propaganda of the time assumed, a real alternative to capitalism. They had in embryo in fact a superseding of capitalism on a capitalist basis. Under the austere opulence of its red palaces and city arches, the prosopopoeia of Bologna cradled the germ of a future in which production was constituted by social wealth and a regenerating process of self-valorization. This future has become our present, one in which decades of social cooperation with its institutions are now sold through expensive services to citizens, while Bologna becomes a “super-commodity” for visitors thanks to territorial marketing.³¹

If Pasolini reads well the stabilizing power that the PCI exercised and that was perfectly compatible with a capitalist modernization, he nonetheless drastically overlooks the potential for the opposition and repression that this model incubated. Pasolini had already passed away but when the next wave of the student Movement gained momentum in 1977, the efficient and democratic appearance of the Communist municipality quickly turned into an authoritarian one supporting the military repression of the Italian government who sent tanks and put under siege the city. This contradiction was perfectly captured by Gad Lerner, back then a militant and now a well known journalist, when he stated “Bologna is red, but red with shame” [*Bologna è rossa, ma rossa di vergogna*]. Later on, this became a favorite slogan among students.

³¹ On the notion of super-commodity applied to public spaces, see Vanni Codeluppi, *Lo Spettacolo della Merce* (Milano: Bompiani, 2000).

The tea cups and Bologna are two elements that explain the prosopopoeia-like nature of commodities. They define the breach between the ideology of development as the production of superfluous commodities and of a subject that must consume them, and what instead Pasolini calls progress as the satisfaction of necessary needs.³² Before we move into the anthropological mutation that this change entails for the whole of Italian society and especially for the new subjectivities emerging from 1968, let us linger on the theoretical framing of this transformation tracing it back once again to Gramsci's thought.

The Linguistic Nature of the Passive Revolution

When confronting the processes of mechanization of human labor and the social practices that are born out of it, it is safe to keep open the dialectic between the new degrees of freedom that are produced and their related forms of oppression. Gramsci articulated this linkage through the concept of the passive revolution. He borrowed the term from the Neapolitan intellectual Vincenzo Cuoco (1770-1823), who had used it to describe the failed revolutionary attempt of the Parthenopean Republic of 1799. Initially, Gramsci employed it to describe the Risorgimento as a “revolution without a revolution;” but later it became clear that Fordism too was a transformation without change, for the latter aimed at surpassing the liberal phase of capitalism through the establishment of a planned economy, while keeping untouched the prerogatives of its system.³³

³² See Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dir. Laura Betti.

³³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 114. It derives from the two principles that Marx established in the *Preface of The Critique of Political Economy*: “1. that no social formation disappears as long as the productive forces which have developed within it still find room for further forward movement; 2. that a society does not itself set tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated.” Gramsci quotes Marx by memory, but it is clear the he is linking the concept of the passive revolution with what I called the principle of *materialist finitization*. He also adds that it must be understood dialectically. Not as the “belief in some kind of fatalism” fomenting a widespread “indifferentism,” but as the postulation of a “necessary [...] antithesis which can present intransigently all its potentialities for development.” *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 114.

Furthermore, even if Fordism was applied in a very limited form and had to face the general backwardness of the Italian situation, Gramsci read the “socialization and co-operation in the sphere of production” brought about by the fascist regime as the “only solution whereby to develop the productive forces of industries under the direction of the traditional ruling class,” without obviously “touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation of profit.”³⁴ For Gramsci fascism was thus a particular form of the larger phenomenon of the passive revolution: a modernization that preserved residuals of parasitism, of corporativism and a caste’s privileges.³⁵

Two further considerations merit attention. There is at least one element that is connected to the apparatus of Fordism as a passive revolution that Gramsci missed. He did not realize that consumption was a far more complex thing than the basic fulfillment of biological necessities and the foundation of a caste of parasites that “live on so-called past labor, a metaphor to indicate the present labor of others.”³⁶ Gramsci, furthermore, ignored the libidinal attachment that commodities exercised, and of course had little recourse to first hand information to start considering the profound

Althusser does not sense this non-determinist and linear focus, siding with a sort of Crocean critique of Marx. See Louis Althusser, “Marx in his Limits,” *Philosophy of the Encounter: later writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006), 38-39.

³⁴ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 120.

³⁵ Italy’s specific conditions created a hybrid that enjoyed a long-lasting fortune in the history of the country constituting a solid base for the dominant classes. This compromise held together social groups enjoying “situation rent” and other seeking profits, thus combining backward and advanced technological forms of individual and collective exploitation. If we extrapolate from these negative features, those elements that would define a true revolution we will see that the rationalization of society directed at the satisfaction of the needs of the producers would probably constitute the first pillar of such a project. Along with it, I would single out the elimination of the many instances of social parasitism that burdened on Italian society. Lastly the progressive elimination of class privileges and exploitation through the equal participation in production and the redistribution of social wealth demanded also a fierce fight against bureaucratization, which is usually a consequence of the construction of vast state apparatuses. In this sense, Gramsci’s insistence on parasitism can be connected with this idea of a civil society that grows organically, stimulated by active individuals and not by a state socialization that uniforms and crystallizes collective life in definite set of rights and duties. The post-war PCI did not really follow this organic perspective, often falling in a mystique of the state as the guarantor of the socialization of the means of production.

³⁶ Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: ElectBook, 2001), 363.

stabilizing power they had over the whole of society.³⁷ It is true that he sensed the danger of the new “necessities” that the system was creating for its consumer, but he did not explore the productive element of consumption.

Lastly, Gramsci warns against the use of the passive revolution as an abstract historical schema. For if the latter is not “purged of every residue of mechanicism and fatalism,” it faces the “danger of historical defeatism.”³⁸ As any other socio-political situation, this revolution without a revolution is in fact always the result of an “equilibrium of political forces,” both at the national and international levels.³⁹ The engaged intellectual must not forget the historicity of such a situation and read through the economic and political contradictions that generated it in order to change them.

Facing the very first consequences of the mass production and consumption of commodities as a powerful homogenizing factor, Pasolini usually fell back on a kind of tragic fatalism. The subjugating capacities of the neocapitalist passive revolution seemed to him mighty forces that ruthlessly conquered peoples and places. Yet the novelty of his analysis resides in his re-articulation of this transformation in the light of the linguistic-scientific direction that the developments of the forces of production were clearly undertaking. For Pasolini this transformation “which would be a simple evolution if it were a question of a purely extensive fact,” it is “instead a revolution” because of “the transformation of the scientific spirit into the application of science” and “the anthropological mutations that this implies.”⁴⁰ The scientific factor that Pasolini mentions here is, as I mentioned above, the new productive capacity which

³⁷ See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

³⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 107, 114.

³⁹ To this list Gramsci also adds the “politico-military equilibrium;” see *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 107, 175-85.

⁴⁰ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 64. Pasolini frames this discussion in the light of linguistic practices and the diachronic changes they undergo as they register socio-political turmoil provoked by class struggle.

pushes society to organize its social relations around the consumption of superfluous goods. This structural transformation is what Pasolini calls an “internal revolution of the system.” It is a revolution that is disjointed from the external (anticapitalist) forces and thus produces a transformation grafted on the same prerogatives of its own original structure.⁴¹ It is still based on exploitation and, if apparently it minimizes social discrepancies through the improving of the standard of living, in actual fact it subjects lower strata to consumerism rendering them slaves of a more subtle and pervasive power. To summarize: Pasolini accepts the main features of Gramsci’s idea of the passive revolution, then updates it and, as I show, develops its association with fascism.

What stands out in this analysis is Pasolini’s attempt to identify the characteristics of this new normalization and incorporation of subordinated groups and its heavy investment in the symbolic and linguistic domains. As I said, it is not just the prosopopoeia-like status of commodities that Pasolini discovers, but also the immaterial quality that the advancement of mechanization produces. This quality is intrinsically linguistic, for as he says the “languages of the infrastructures, let us simply say the languages of production, are guiding society linguistically.”⁴² Pasolini’s most important contribution to the critical understanding of the new modernization takes in fact the form of a linguistic analysis of social processes. Before taking that question up, I need to clarify further Pasolini’s stance; in other words his theoretical position with regard to this issue.

Now, the two distinctive characteristics of Pasolini’s pessimistic reframing of the passive revolution are: a painful mourning for what the new accumulation was sweeping out, the vestiges of non-capitalist territories, and, at the same time, the

⁴¹ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 63.

⁴² Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 63.

detailed study of the movement forward in the secularization and commodification of Italian society entering into an age of abundance. The mourning for an original essence is constituent with Pasolini's style and his dense, robust language that feeds on this primary loss as an engine for narration. Beautiful as it is in its tormenting tone, this search for an original fullness is probably the less critical element of his analysis and has been labeled in different ways: populism, primitivism, and archaism.⁴³ However, for Pasolini peasants and urban lumpenproletariat contain some positive original element that critics have defined as the longing for a primitive truth and innocence, or at least an authentic immediacy to the subject matter he confronted.⁴⁴ For Pasolini this pre-capitalist world, or as he calls it the "leftover of a preceding civilization," represented an all comprising source of value.⁴⁵ Contrasting it with the critical knowledge that the proletariat had to develop in order to liberate itself, Pasolini, in his famous long poem, *The Ashes of Gramsci* (1957), argues that this

Proletarian life
that preceded you; for me it is a religion,
its joy, not its millennial
struggle; its nature, not its
consciousness.⁴⁶

⁴³ See for instance Alberto Asor Rosa, *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Roma: Samonà e Savelli, 1972).

⁴⁴ See Van Watson, 15; Aldo Carotenuto, *L'Autunno della Coscienza* (Turin: Boringhieri, 1985); Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, *Sex, the Self, and the Sacred. Women in the Cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 11-13.

⁴⁵ *Scritti corsari*, 66.

⁴⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poems* (New York: Noonday Press, 1982), 11. Consider how Pasolini turns over an asset of Marxist philosophy such as Engels firm belief that at least one positive element in urbanization had to be stressed. As he argues "the great cities have transformed the disease of the social body, which appears in chronic form in the country, into an acute one, and so made manifest its real nature and the means of curing it. Without the great cities and their forcing influence upon the popular intelligence, the working-class would be far less advanced than it is." Frederick Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch07.htm>>.

I believe that this concept of nature represents the poet's re-inscription of a certain idea of naturalness expressed in the language of the myth. Pasolini's critical opponents usually overlook this key mythical experience, but it does indeed structure his writings. Similarly to Cesare Pavese's idea of *lucore* (luminosity), this "sub-proletarian life" is invested with an aura that touches the deepest emotions of the poet and surpasses any attempt of rationalization.⁴⁷ It embodies a symbolic dimension charged with the powerful force of a pre-logical experience of meaning. As Pavese explains, mythical thinking builds on "the uniqueness of the gesture, or the event;" this implies "doing something once and for all, causing the gesture to fill with meanings in a process of eternal re-filling," so that "thanks to its fixity [this gesture] ceases to be realistic."⁴⁸ This is why mythical reasoning establishes an unshakable symbolic hierarchy. What Pasolini calls in fact a pre-historic "proletarian life" becomes for him an all constitutive model, which he longs for and thus conjures up in his work. I will not explore this long debated issue. Suffice it to say, however, that this is the kernel of a mythical originality that Pasolini sets as a yardstick to measure the damages of modern development. For us it becomes only a *methodological* principle, a reactant to initiate and energize our critique, without laying the claim of being a concrete solution. Pasolini is a critical counter-point.

A Critique of Modernization and its Agents

According to Pasolini, the Church, one of the most solid institutions of the pre-capitalist Italian society, indeed its true backbone, received a fatal blow not by a proletarian emancipation, nor by the official left, but by consumerism. Pasolini maintains that consumer culture is an obscene [*scandalosa*] contradiction that bound

⁴⁷ See Cesare Pavese, "Del mito, del simbolo e d'altro," *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1951), 302.

⁴⁸ Pavese, 300.

religion, in a self-destructive fashion, to the new era of mass consumption.

Monarchy's power, even fascism, as earthly political powers were less damaging for the Church than the new bourgeois spirit which aimed at "furnishing people with a total and unitary vision of life."⁴⁹ New beliefs, new behaviors, and especially the construction of a new identity replaced the "authority and form of power" of the Church.⁵⁰

This point is best explained by Pasolini through a witty analysis of a commercial advertisement for clothing. In the wake of Roman Jakobson's famous study of the political slogan "I like Ike," Pasolini decodes an advertisement by Oliviero Toscani for a brand called Jesus Jeans which read "You shall not have other Jeans other than me." For Pasolini the profane tone of the advertisement contains an essential truth that goes beyond the mere effect of the parody. The pun on the name Jesus lays out a new social architecture in which the commodity marks the subjection of a transcendental principle, Jesus, to the utilitarian forces of production. It is a totalitarian annexation of the whole of reality, through the replacement of one form of power – the dogma of religion – with a new one, consumerism.

In the same article Pasolini also pokes fun at an article published by the Vatican newspaper that reacted with scandal to the profanity of such an advertisement.⁵¹ According to Pasolini this reaction was unjustified. There had been more than one ambiguous relation between capitalism and the Church. Having made a pact with capitalism in order to fence off the proletarian forces, now that the former was rapidly becoming a totalizing form of life, the Church progressively lost its hegemony over the Italian people. But apart from launching useless anathemas, what remained to do for this venerable and once powerful institution was only negotiating

⁴⁹ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 20.

⁵⁰ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 22.

⁵¹ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 18.

the transmission of power, and assuring certain exterior protections to the privileges of the old caste. Its destiny was doomed.

Now if an older form of power is replaced by a new one, the disciplinary mechanisms of control also vary according to the structure of the new system. In this essay, Pasolini seems to be still open to the exploration of political ruptures and even to the overcoming of this new form of passive revolution. He thus points to the potential field that such a liberation from a hierarchical notion of truth could generate. This “unforeseeable opportunity” resides in the politicization of the very advertisement “and thus presumably of the entire technological world.” As Pasolini argues:

Perhaps this entails that even the future that to us humanist and religious people looks like death and blockage will be, in a new world, history; and that the existence of production’s pure communicability will be somehow contradicted. Indeed the slogan of these jeans does not simply express the urge to consume, but to a more extreme degree, it is a nemesis – albeit an unaware one – that punishes the Church for its pact with the devil.⁵²

When it comes to the spelling out of the concrete processes of the liberalization of older and fixed forms of social interaction, Pasolini shows all his capacities to read the minutiae of everyday life in order to chisel out the footprints of social contradiction.⁵³ There is in fact a Gramscian afflatus in this last move that stresses the need not just to

⁵² Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 22.

⁵³ In this we read Pasolini debt to Gramsci’s, especially when the former sets out to dissect the linguistic elements of these societal changes.

understand, but also to change reality. Thus also “the future” can potentially return under control and become history again. The road toward the overturning of a totalitarian capitalist society is gauged as an unexpected result, but its articulation is unfortunately missing. Nemesis in fact cannot become a platform for political action. Rather it is simply vindication, the belated paying back for a mistake. The nature of this mistake however incorporates some truth, as the parallel between religious and intellectual people reveals. It is what Pasolini calls in his Apology to the poem *The PCI to the Young!!*, the “last possible choice – on the eve of the assimilation of bourgeois history to human history – in favor of what is not bourgeois.”⁵⁴ What is this kernel of truth? How does it connect with those subjectivities that were hoping to overturn bourgeois society?

Pasolini begins exploring the heterogeneous world of the youth Movement in another article, “*Il discorso dei capelli*” [Hair’s Discourse]. Here he makes a curious argument for the silent statement uttered by the physical appearance of the first beatniks he encounters in Prague. Their long hair voices, according to Pasolini, a non-verbal message. This is a mute message not because it is expressed through constructions other than words or signs, but because of its content. For Pasolini the discourse of the beatniks’ look is ineffable and thus highly undifferentiated, because it embodies a radical negation. Their “unarticulated language,” he says, was expressing physically their *no* to “the madness of a destiny as executives.”⁵⁵ For Pasolini their negation does not have a constructive, architectonic value. Instead it is characterized by the direct rejection of a certain state of affairs. As a result, the fact that their action is only a denial silences their utterance. As we will see, things are far more complicated.

⁵⁴ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 157.

⁵⁵ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 11; Marcuse makes a similar argument when he talks about the “great refusal” to “the global dominion of corporate capitalism,” vi.

However, at this point Pasolini is still sympathetic to the malaise of the new generation, but he cannot help noticing that the beatnik subculture is itself a by-product of the chaotic movement of capitalism. Now the term subculture is not intrinsically derogatory. It simply points instead to the act of separation and opposition to common cultural practices that a subset of the cultural system operates. The dominant system Pasolini refers to is built around a rigid work ethic, the affirmation of patriarchal rules, and a regimentation of sexuality which was strictly imposed on women, and generously tolerant for males. Clearly these are also the principles of the Fordist family that the new wave of social unrest was ready to kick out of history. Yet, according to Pasolini, while strenuously fighting these principles, the beatnik subculture reinstates a new set of values that are completely functional to the advancement of capitalism. Its tenets were not only a vast process of secularization, but also included a strong hedonistic drive, i.e. the rising of pleasure to the level of a guiding principle. The young generation was establishing “new religious values inside bourgeois entropy, precisely when the latter was becoming perfectly secularized and hedonistic.”⁵⁶ Another way of saying this is that the Movement’s struggle fosters the “attainment of one’s own rights [which] merely promotes the person who gains them to the ranks of the bourgeois.”⁵⁷ It is, in short, the turn to the hedonism of consumption that consumer culture foments and that, to a certain extent, 1968 was using as a picklock to break out of the Fordist cage.

Clues about the traps that the Movement was slipping into can be found in another article entitled “*La prima vera rivoluzione di destra*” [The First Real Right-wing Revolution]. The list of titles for high schools’ final examination offers Pasolini the opportunity to spell out the material structure of the new power and its

⁵⁶ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 11.

⁵⁷ Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters*, 122.

compromises with older institution. Pasolini insists particularly on one of the titles that, citing Benedetto Croce, asked students to talk about the traditional relation between father and son. The subject matter was particularly delicate since it asked the students to talk about the issue of generational ties, a social institution that had been radically questioned by the Student Movement just a few years before. Still the wording of the title stubbornly defended a hierarchical knowledge of the transmission of power among generations. A defense of such outdated values appeared to Pasolini as the old regime's pitiful need to save appearances. He underscores the ambiguous game that power is playing in the wake of his idea of internal revolution. He argues that the "revolutionary reaction" carried out by the right wing is revolutionary in that it destroys its "older social institutions (family, culture, language, Church)," but it is also conservative in its apparent defense "of these same institutions from the attacks of the workers and intellectuals."⁵⁸ Here Pasolini perfectly describes the heterogeneity of Italian capitalism avoiding a mechanist application of Marxism. Within Italian modernization *residual* elements of past social formation are still crucial and have objective value even when they seem in contradiction with new social practices and needs.⁵⁹ Thus what capital defends publicly on one side constantly undermines it on the other. This is the two-steps strategy that capital adopts. This double-movement constitutes the land-locked space of contemporary power and the space of action for resisting subjectivities.

Pasolini notes that probably the majority of the students wrote their essays with great zeal, obeying authority's imperative of paying homage to the residues of the past. Others instead probably criticized this traditionalist father-son relation. These

⁵⁸ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 25.

⁵⁹ This is a political element of Italian history still at work today. Certain social practices and meanings are always selected and incorporated by modern dominant culture which has interest in representing areas of human experience securing social cohesiveness. See Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 37-45.

young people, Pasolini argues, are “the younger brothers of the students who revolted in 1968.”⁶⁰ They represent the segment of society that is still fighting to bring about change, but under the enormous pressure of consumer culture, their opposition takes up the form of a social restlessness, a neurosis which follows two different routes. The one that Pasolini privileges resembles an “anxious neurosis, that keeps alive the possibility of a protest.”⁶¹ Neurosis here must be read in its proper psychoanalytical frame, that is to say, as the symptom of an unresolved social conflict produced by the desire for a non-capitalist life. Pasolini summarizes this through a beautiful image. He states that these students are “young fathers, just like we are old sons.”⁶² These students are young, albeit simultaneously mature, since they still live the conflict between the oppression of capital and their desire as subaltern groups; while people like Pasolini are the inheritors of this conflict grown old and overpowered by power. For Pasolini, both categories are eventually doomed to disappear. They embody in fact an externality, an otherness to capitalism that consumerism will quickly erase from human consciousness.

The second kind of opposition is characterized instead by people who suffer from an “atrocious euphoric neurosis that makes them accept without any restraints the new hedonism with which power replaces past moral values.”⁶³ These students, the protagonists of 1968, for Pasolini, unleash their desire for a non-capitalist life, precisely in the dispositifs of capitalism’s false freedom. However it is not just mass consumption that Pasolini condemns, but also a liberalized form of sexuality. The student struggle for more power, for a larger participation in the shares of general

⁶⁰ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 29.

⁶¹ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 29.

⁶² Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 29.

⁶³ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 29.

wealth, is fundamentally a plunging into capitalist mechanisms of containment and control of the dominated groups.

2.2 Capitalism, Fascism and Non-procreative Love

To be sure, in Pasolini's perspective, capitalism is an irrational order, or rather a process of rationalization that follows an irrational principle. It is entropy, a scheme of things that leads toward further chaos. This mounting wave of social and economic transformation provokes the disappearance of non-capitalist forms of life and social practices. The very spatial assimilation of the landscape into the industrial sphere defines a new uniformity, that of commodification, a process that only today has reached its most mature form, but that precisely because of the existence of spaces yet not colonized had, at that time, an acute impact on Pasolini. Not even a capillary system of control like fascism had succeeded in modeling the life of the new generations as mass consumption did in a matter of a few years. Pasolini argues that fascism did not really reach "the depth of their soul," rather it superficially regimented behaviors of Italians, but not "their way of being."⁶⁴ Neocapitalism instead was able to extend this control over the totality of Italian society so that, in his last years, Pasolini would repeat again and again that this new social organization built around conformism, permissivism and hedonism was the true and most perfect realization of fascism.

The link between conformism, permissivism and hedonism is crucial. I believe conformism is the point of arrival of a process which can eventually function by itself. First comes permissivism as the liberal smashing of restrictions, i.e. de-regulation. Once the field is liberalized there rises immediately the need for a new productive mechanism: hedonism. So when Pasolini provocatively states that the fall

⁶⁴ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 289-290.

of sexual prohibitions evacuates pleasure he is not upholding the old sex phobia of conservatism; rather he is making a fundamental psychoanalytical point, one that Žižek posits at the core of Lacan's understanding of the functioning of superego. Departing from a standard Freudian notion of superego as the moral component of personality, for Lacan superego is still the site of the imperative, but of an obscene kind, that of "an injunction to enjoyment," So that "freedom-to-enjoy is reversed into obligation to enjoy - which, one must add, is the most effective way to block access to enjoyment."⁶⁵ The injunction to enjoyment takes hedonism to its extremes and, as it is combined to a liberalized field of individual determinations (permissivism), it constitutes the subtle form of control known as consumerism.

Saló, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975) can be read as the visual rendering of this entropic but self-controlled order. Power here is displayed in its hidden and deadly nature. Hedonism becomes terror, sexuality torture, humans are simply bodies... *Saló* is the allegory of a social system where "any transgression of the imposed nudity or sexual perversion classifies as an act of autonomy," which is thus "punishable by torture of death."⁶⁶ Through the staging of the private inferno ruled by a fascist-libertine gang at the eve of the regime's fall, it is possible to read the degradation provoked by consumer society that obsessed Pasolini. As the young bodies of the gloomy ending of the film are one by one mercilessly slaughtered, the new generations are chewed by the inhuman machinery of consumer society, a new, and highly more efficient form of fascism.⁶⁷ The mighty powers of the new fascism are thus re-written

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), 237. See also by the same author "From Politics to Biopolitics . . . and Back," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 509.

⁶⁶ Ryan-Scheutz, 203; For my discussion on *Saló* I want to thank Tim Campbell and the graduate students who took part to the seminar "Italian Political Cinema," Cornell, Spring 2009.

⁶⁷ Inquired about the scatological nature of *Saló*, Pasolini replies by saying that consumer culture makes people "eat shit: Knapp soup, or Saiwa cookies are shit. This in the movie will not be shown, because it is a mystery. But it is obvious that when I shot it I thought about it." Pasolini, "De Sade e l'universo dei consumi," *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Il cinema in forma di poesia*, Luciano De Giusti, ed., (Pordenone:

through the allegory of the fascist gang's absolute sovereignty over a young group of victims. Now this point deserves closer scrutiny.

The unleashing of this libidinal will to power is restricted to the fascist-libertines who establish their rule through a formal act: the writing of a sinister constitution that regulates life in the villa where they have assembled their victims. Pasolini recapitulates thus a primary scene of sovereignty: constituent power that founds its power through a codification of rules. But this normative setting is empty; it has no real norm, except the enforcing of the exercise of power and its desires. Consumer society is equally empty, as I said, it grants a freedom that relies on an injunction. Pasolini's use of sexuality is key to understand the consequences of this false idea of freedom. In consumer society individuals are at the same time victims and victimizers; they take advantage and are simultaneously exploited by a system that is based on an endless cycle of production and consumption. In *Saló*, Pasolini breaks this unity into two figures: the fascist exploiters and their victims. Unrestrained sexual desire takes on the form of torture, but in its libidinal drive it exhibits much more than the depravation of the fascists. It incriminates modern society as a whole for in the latter, just like in the fascist villa, the order is one of unrestrained enjoyment. Thus what happens in the movie bears testimony to "fascism's actual ideological functioning, which is one of superego obscene enjoyment."⁶⁸ The spectator's uneasiness in watching a movie like *Saló* may lie precisely in the uncanny semblance of this sexual excess. The latter looks like something utterly dreadful and yet feels also dangerously close. What is this closeness but the hidden biopolitical intensities of the social body? *Saló*'s visualization of power in a naked and unrestrained form reminds us of how a pure immanent intensification of biopolitical potentialities would take the

Edizioni cinema zero, 1979), 165. The famous scene of coprophagy is telling of the candor of this statement.

⁶⁸ Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 187.

subject towards disastrous consequences. Thus the movie works as a photo-negative of the secularization process of Italian society and of its conformism as a collective disavowal of its real vicious cycle. I will come back to this point when dealing with Negri's idea of the multitude and its biopolitical strength.⁶⁹

Saló is a difficult movie where, as Pasolini stated, sex functions "as a metaphor of the relationship between power and those who are subjected to it."⁷⁰ A full discussion of the movie and its dark allegory would take me astray from the topic of this chapter, and so prefer to focus on the origins of Pasolini's convictions or, as he mentions at times, his *feelings* towards the social consequences of the Italian modernization. Pasolini had reached his conclusions on the falsity of the sexual revolution after the making of a relatively unknown documentary that he shot in 1965, *Comizi d'amore* (Love Meetings). The documentary is divided in four chapters, called *Ricerche* (inquiries). Chapter 1 begins with the general questioning of the importance of sexuality in the life of Italian people and sets the ground for chapter 2 that deals with the issue of homosexuality (or sexual deviations as it was called at the time). Chapter 3 deals mostly with the issue of divorce, while the last chapter tackles the problem of prostitution and the law that had recently declared brothels illegal in 1958.⁷¹ The coda is a wedding of a young couple, Pasolini's cousin, Graziella Chiarcossi and the writer Vincenzo Cerami.

As a wonderful exercise in contemporary ideology, the documentary reveals a deep emotional involvement in the filming of the expressions of common Italian people that is truly remarkable. Along with other works by Bertolucci, *Love Meetings* will stand as sort of anthropological inquiry on the images, sounds and mannerism of a

⁶⁹ See chapter 5, 369-378.

⁷⁰ Pasolini, "De Sade e l'universo dei consumi," 163.

⁷¹ See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 80-81. The so called Legge Merlin was passed by the Italian parliament after a long debate in 1958 declaring illegal brothels.

part of Italy that was being rapidly swept away by the modernization of the country. Beyond that, however, as Maurizio Viano remarked “the value of *Comizi d’amore* is to be found in the documentary representation of men and women, young and old, wearing masks.”⁷² For instance, Pasolini’s “obsessive frontal close-up [...] allows the viewer to perceive the physiognomy of lying. In fact, lying is nothing but the obedience to codes of self-representation, the codes of the mask.”⁷³ These are the expressions of those Italians who are either falling for the new Italy of the economic boom or for the bourgeoisies who are hypocritically representing a world that does not exist anymore. In fact one could question Viano’s one-sided assumption that the wearing of a mask implies lying. As false conscience, ideology is not the intentional negation of some truth. These people are not hiding something, rather they are simply working their way around difficult questions in order to render them acceptable. Hence their simulation, their performing a social (ideological) conformism.⁷⁴

In the opening scene, the camera moves erratically following the fanciful answers of a flock of children who are asked where babies come from. The naïveté of their answers and their spontaneity summarizes Pasolini’s understanding of the personality of the Italian people.⁷⁵ Italians are at best innocent creatures, who believe in stories passed down to them from above and as such are passively accepted. These children represent the core of the discourse of sexuality: they are its product and the future of the community. Pasolini’s voice tenderly questions them, and kindly insists in asking how they were born. But they cannot explain their birth without using elaborated tales involving cranes, Jesus or God. They ignore their origin. They are life that runs unaware of its own power and contradictions, and in this fashion they are

⁷² Viano, 123.

⁷³ Viano, 124.

⁷⁴ For this suggestion I am indebted to Lucia Re.

⁷⁵ Bazzocchi, 80; see Viano, 122-123; Michel Foucault, “Grey Mornings of Tolerance,” *The Poetics of Heresy*, Beverly Allen, ed., (Saratoga: ANMA, 1982), 72-74.

brought up by their parents who are guiltily and equally blind to their own contradictions as parents, as lovers and citizens in a country that is undergoing a rapid process of modernization and secularization.

In the preparatory work for the documentary, Pasolini had a clear, almost pedagogical goal that during the shooting was progressively invalidated by the reality he discovered. The original goal was to combine and confront what common people thought about sexuality with more knowledgeable responses by others, such as intellectuals, for as it is claimed in the opening, *Love Meetings* was supposed to be “a crusade against ignorance and fear.”⁷⁶ The plainness and crudeness of the original title *Cento paia di buoi* (One hundred pair of oxen) describes well Pasolini’s intention to desecrate the romantic layers that oblate sexuality, to descend in the bare dynamics of instincts, conventions and fears. Most of all this title metaphorically describes the sexual life of Italian couples as imbued by a generalized unawareness, a commonsensical notion that one must procreate, work and consume just like a pair of oxen go about in a field ploughing the earth because this is simply their life. *Love Meetings* is the attempt to face “sexual taboos,” “to talk about it, to make of it a scientific subject,” it is indeed a sort of agronomy of human passions that attempts piercing through its common deceptions.⁷⁷

This was Pasolini’s initial project. However, facing a society that was rapidly changing under the pressure of consumption and television culture, Pasolini stumbled

⁷⁶ As the speaker says in the self-reflexive moment of the opening scene “the author, having put aside any idealist ambition, gathers material for a great monument to the very old and hot Italy of the 60’s,” Betti and Gulinucci, eds., *Le regole di un’illusione: i film, il cinema* (Roma: Associazione “Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini”, 1991), 83. The original project was much vaster than an inquiry on sexuality in Italian society and included also the subject of mental disease and sexual crimes. The title of the file of the Arco Film archive the material is grouped under the title “Natura e contro Natura” (Nature and against Nature). See “Comizi d’amore di Pier Paolo Pasolini 1963. Un documento e una testimonianza di grande cinema-verità,” *pasolini.net*, <http://www.pasolini.net/cinema_comizid%27amore_recensione.htm>.

⁷⁷ De Giusti, *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Il cinema in forma di poesia*, 124; see also Betti and Gulinucci, 82-87.

on a set of contradictions that he had not foreseen and that later played an important role in his theorization of neocapitalism. Pasolini finds himself facing a social reality which appears fractured between a patriarchal block (slightly differentiated according to regional variants) and a more modern section of the Italian population that is a victim of an unshakable form of conformism.⁷⁸ The voice over that introduces the different scenes comments on this idea arguing that “in the deep south ideas on sex are clear. The North is modern but the ideas on sex are confused... wreckage of an old ideology unable to understand and judge reality as a whole.”⁷⁹ The cleavage between these two worlds is produced by the economic boom that, even though it accelerated a process of secularization, actually acted as a regressive factor on the whole of Italian society.

Pasolini argues that “from a sexual point of view, ordinary Italian people” were “not very repressed.” It is the “petit bourgeoisie” who is “naturally repressed,” even though s/he does not really suffer from “a very sincere repression.” Catholicism in its popular dimension is not a “rigid religion,” since, as Pasolini believes, it “superimposed itself on paganism, particularly among ordinary people, without changing them in the slightest.”⁸⁰ These commentaries seem to overlook the degrees of oppression that patriarchal society imposed on men and mostly on women. To say the least, driven by his search for pre-capitalist spaces of resistance, Pasolini takes for granted the continuous struggle that created some pockets of freedom in patriarchal societies and even within these spaces he does not assess the power structure that dominated it.

⁷⁸ On the connection between conformism and embourgeoisement as loss of the sacred see William Van Watson, 8-9.

⁷⁹ *Love Meetings* [*Comizi d'amore*] Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini. Water Bearer Films, 2003. From here on I quote the English subtitles as they appear in the movie. For the script in Italian see Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli, 417-474.

⁸⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini. Interviews with Oswald Stack* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 67.

That said it is the bourgeoisie and its ideology that are the real target of Pasolini's critique. The new rhetoric of tolerance and the social pressure towards heterosexuality that it generates unleashes energies against other objectives. It is in chapter two of the documentary that Pasolini offers a wide array of reactions to what at the time were called abnormal sexual behaviors. The title of the second chapter is "Disgust or Pity," and these are the two invariable responses to Pasolini's insinuations about homosexuality.

The most representative case is that of a group of upper class men interviewed in a train car. Their ideology is articulated through the spatial dimension of a tiny place. The closed, geometric and claustrophobic environment visualizes the men's petit bourgeois ideology which is also reinstated by Pasolini's choices in the cinematic construction of the scene. Instead of the usual frontal close-up, he chooses a high angle. Pasolini stands in front of the person being interviewed who naturally keeps looking at him, but he remains off screen. The result is that interviewee responds to the questions while looking away from the camera, as if his incapacity to deal with the topic implied the impossibility of visualizing it. This is underscored at the scene's closing, when the man, pressed by Pasolini's insistent questioning, declares that he feels "disgust, horror," and that homosexuality "should be severely repressed."⁸¹

Homosexuality thus enters the visual field as the unseen or the unspoken, so that this sequence becomes particularly disorienting because the viewer cannot find a point of reference. The usual conveyors that pin down the object of discussion, i.e. the characters' direct look at the camera or Pasolini's presence, are missing. It is a play between mirrors that reflect an object that we cannot see. The scopic here frames the social conformism of the bourgeois and while doing this it simultaneously criticizes it. Visually absent and verbally only indirectly mentioned, homosexuality emerges with a

⁸¹ *Love Meetings*.

distinct unsettling force. Everybody is looking away from it: the man who feels repulsed, the viewer who looks at the men looking away from it. The visual effect of this sequence is possibly the best example of the exercise in the representation of ideologies that animates Pasolini's film. It circumscribes with precision the place and the function that homosexuality entertain in the agronomy of passions of Italian society, i.e. its irreducible *alterity*.

Challenging further the interviewees, Pasolini reverts to another argument that displaces the fear of homosexuality from the person to his or her future children. Responses here are more articulated, since the interviewee is obliged to face homosexuality as a fact (even if hypothetical) and cannot simply deny its existence. The majority of the responses, especially by women, are characterized by a more casual and superficially scientific tone. They all agree that children should be informed etc... But this more than casual attitude is due merely to the mother's preoccupation that her child would follow the sexual norm, would fit in society, which obviously precludes any kind of sexual act falling short from a prescribed, albeit more permissive, heterosexuality. This false liberation based on the exclusion of what remains outside heterosexuality, produces in the best cases pity. For the majority of the people instead, it generates a violent form of repulsion based on a very simple fact. The transformation of sex from something hidden and prohibited to a new territory of social affirmation that, instead of repressing, solicits and makes the instinctual needs a social obligation, compresses the space for what deviates from the heterosexual norm. Hence for Pasolini, the intolerance, the fierce repulsion against a dark zone that cannot be named and whose marginality attracts the hate produced by this new totalitarian conformism.

To be sure, the link between tolerance and homophobic behaviors is not as automatic as Pasolini presents it. It is not the concession of larger sexual liberties in

itself that produces an immediate reaction against non-heterosexual relationships. The distorted dynamics that turn what might seem progress into degradation are grounded in the role that reproduction plays in society and only the neo-feminism of 1970s will be able to clearly lay them out. In his movies, think of *Teorema* (1968) for instance, Pasolini is however able to unmask the mystifications that the rhetoric of development foments when praising the progressive nature of a society that was instead passively adapting to the restructuring of production. It is the conforming to this absolute social norm that for Pasolini represents the real and degrading factor of the new national character of Italian people.

Against this overarching wave of conformism, writers Alberto Moravia (1907-1990), along with the father of Italian psychoanalysis Cesare Musatti (1897-1989) represent the external, objective point of view of the documentary. Moravia and Musatti are the scientists who are capable of explaining the hidden reasons behind the conformism of Italian society. Moreover, in articulating a more mature understanding of how sexuality affects society, they also present an updated version of the Gramscian notion of good common sense as a correction to conformism.

Moravia lays out the socio-psychological dynamics at work behind the scandalized reaction of the Italians to Pasolini's questions. "There is always a concrete possibility to understand things, and what is understood does not shock" Moravia asserts; unfortunately "the person who gets shocked is a profoundly uncertain person."⁸² Scandal, said Italian psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, "is the sign of the presence of a problem that carries the force of a menace."⁸³ Being shocked is the immediate reaction to a danger, to something that is different and simultaneously threatening for the individual. It is the fear of "losing one's personality" and falling

⁸² Betti and Gulinucci, 86.

⁸³ Franco Basaglia, "La soluzione finale," *Che Fare?* 5 (1969): 5.

prey of the power of instincts.⁸⁴ For Moravia instead, any behavior can and must be examined and then judged, avoiding the blinding dismissal that the usual scandalized reaction entails.

Glossing over Moravia, Pasolini thus remarks: “the shocked person is uncertain, hence conformist.” According to Pasolini, this is in a nutshell the national disease that affects Italians. But it is here that the psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti enters the dialogue arguing against an all too easy condemnation of the notion of conformism – later on, he would also criticize Pasolini’s work and *Love Meetings*, calling it a reactionary operation.⁸⁵ Musatti underscores the civilizing function of the set of beliefs and social institutions that constitute conformism. Consequently, conformism is a “psychological defense against the aggression of one’s own instinctive impulses” that would in fact menace collective life. Scandal is thus the kernel of the “instinct of preservation,” as Pasolini ironically summarizes and turns over to Moravia who concludes: “I’d say that a belief that has been achieved through reason and an exact study of reality is elastic enough never to be shocked.” On the other hand, a belief that has been passively interiorized is a conformism and thus, when faced with changes, is naturally inclined towards refusal and shock.⁸⁶ Pasolini calls this typical conformist Italian attitude “the stubborn uncertainty of those who are insecure.”⁸⁷

Once this structure is laid out, the task for Pasolini becomes twofold and follows Gramsci’s idea of the passage from common sense to good common sense, i.e. a shared but still popular world view that possesses the rational coherence of a philosophy.⁸⁸ On one side, according to Musatti’s remarks, one must recognize and explain the function of beliefs as social infrastructures for the functioning of a society

⁸⁴ Betti and Gulinucci, 85-86.

⁸⁵ See *Pasolini on Pasolini*, 66.

⁸⁶ *Love Meetings*.

⁸⁷ Betti and Gulinucci, 86.

⁸⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 323-330.

without condemning them because of their foundational task. They are institutions. They have an organizational goal, and hence they aim at preserving a certain order. On the other hand, if fully understood in their historical nature, beliefs become critically aware of their function, in brief they become political elements. They can thus be progressively interpreted and changed in order to improve social interactions, but at the same time they should not fall prey to an undifferentiated permissivism. As based on ethical principles, this good conformism does not react with scandal to behaviors that fall outside its ethos. It chooses what is functional to the growth and cohesion of society and on that basis can judge what falls outside of it.

Conformism as bad “common sense” asserts itself instead on the basis of its own anxiety, welding together Italian society, in a time when older kinds of ideologies, like religion, were progressively being replaced by consumerism. For Pasolini, this conformism is reflected by the “average man” who “doesn’t believe in passion and sincerity, he doesn’t believe in people revealing himself,” because his “consciousness is not a class consciousness, it’s a moralistic consciousness, not a political one.”⁸⁹ Among the many interviews Pasolini had, the one that in this sense stands out is probably the aphasia that strikes the Bologna Football Club players when asked to express their opinion on sex. Their ascending position in the society of spectacle cannot tolerate yet the open admission of their role also as male sex symbols, and so they are struck by a long embarrassing silence. Common people instead resort to the repetitions of clichés regarding the sacredness of the family, religion and country characterizing most common responses to questions about homosexuality or divorce.

Pasolini is more sympathetic with the last strongholds of the peasant’s patriarchal society that still coherently expresses the ideology of a segment of the

⁸⁹ Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, 62.

population, with its fixed set of ideas and needs. This ideology is probably the kind of common sense that can potentially be corrected and made systematic because it falls outside the permissivism of consumer culture. Accordingly, when it comes to the problem of honor laws, while disclosing women's oppression, Pasolini depicts southern society and its traditionalist class ideology in a sort of respectful manner. Adele Cambria reflects the same critical interventions that Moravia and Musatti offered when dissecting the bourgeois mentality. She offers a justification for the renowned southerner backwardness by explaining that the objectification of women in the south is the result of the peasants' lack of power. For the southern peasant "who possesses nothing... woman's honor is wealth. If that is lost, all is lost."⁹⁰ The peasants' disfranchisement structures their behavior towards the only thing they are legally entitled to: their wives *qua* personal properties.

As an alternative to social degradation and to the persistence of rigid patriarchal codes, Pasolini chooses a group of working class people on the Tuscan beaches. The episode entitled "Sex as Pleasure," reflects a choral and polyphonic discussion. The scene that stands out here is one shot with low angle, framing the serene, tranquil expression of an aged woman who agrees on the importance of sex in life, and candidly admits that she had always been happy with her husband. It is with this spontaneous and natural response that a good common sense (not a conformism) acquires the unitary force able to organize a society, while simultaneously resisting the rhetoric of development. Scattered around the documentary, these positive examples are usually embodied by women, especially young girls. As Colleen Ryan-Scheutz argued "since most were still subject to patriarchal command, positive instances of

⁹⁰ *Love Meetings*. Maria Antonietta Macciocchi came to similar conclusion in her accounts of Neapolitan subproletariat who "has nothing, it is dirt-poor. No one drinks... or gambles... the only really happy pastime is the conjugal bed." Qtd. in Donald Mayer, *Sex and Power. The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden, and Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 147.

females subjectivities surfaced in selected words and gestures that revealed women's uncorrupted nature within a relatively oppressive environment."⁹¹

Even if portraying these positive instances, *Love Meetings* does not propose a real solution to this set of intricate contradictions of consumer society. The rare positive examples proposed may clarify certain points, but they are peripheral and irrelevant for the majority of the Italian society. As a scientific inquiry in human feelings and sexuality, *Love Meetings* functions mostly as the signaling of misconceptions, fallacies, errors. In line with Pasolini's understanding of cinema as "a language [*linguaggio*] which expresses reality with reality," *Love Meetings* ultimately functions as a mirror in which Italians stare at themselves, and where they could see reflected on the screen their illusions and unconscious repetitions of stereotypes.⁹²

Thus *Love Meetings* carries out a difficult task. The pro-filmic event, i.e. the uncontrolled reality that the camera shoots, is in fact made mostly of unreal stuff. It is the ideological vacuity of conformism that is assembled in the final montage.⁹³

Pasolini's goal is not simply to depict reality, but to criticize it. He knows for sure that the real is mediated by representation and that the latter produces a reality effect.

Hence his striving to open fissures within the ideological narration of the bad conformism he detects in Italians. In doing so Pasolini employs different techniques.

He uses extra-diegetic interventions (Moravia, Musatti), formal devices (the train sequence), captions and titles that frame the inquiry and finally the voice over of the speaker which summarize Pasolini's ideological position. As Jean Delmas maintains *Love Meetings* represents "a corrective to the widespread idea that Pasolini is the director of myth and the irrational."⁹⁴ His interventions and desperate search for an

⁹¹ Ryan-Scheutz, 41.

⁹² Pasolini, *Pasolini on Pasolini*, 29.

⁹³ Kevin W. Sweeney, "The Persistence of Vision: the Re-Emergence of Phenomenological Theories of Film," *Film and Philosophy* 1 (1994): 29-37.

⁹⁴ Qtd. in Viano, 127.

awakening of the Italian people and the contribution for the building of a good common sense are so blatant that they make the film almost a didactic experiment.

Yet even the several occurrences of certain didacticism are never dull. The critique of conformism is further complicated by Pasolini's own understanding of life in general. Life is endowed with a cruel regeneration that outlives any critical self-reflection, and any real awareness of the contradictions that structure human behavior. Life is precisely the pro-filmic event that the camera shoots, that which the artistic critical reconstruction fails to correct or even influence. *Love Meetings* stages the paradox of a reflection that cannot become life. It is a mirror whose critical capacity withers away when confronted with prevailing powers. It is the hope for a good common sense that shines intermittently in the courage of some young girls; in their honest smiles and in the compassionate tone of Pasolini's voice over.

In a way, the clash between his testimony of the catastrophe that was happening and the plain, rude continuation of that same catastrophe is also the real fuel for his work. This is the reason why Pasolini chooses to end the movie with a scene of a young couple getting married. They represent this tenacious capacity that love as a social force has and that society constantly reproduces. Notwithstanding its enormous contradictions, the misery and damages it produces, love stubbornly keeps on regenerating itself. On one side, it lives off a hypertrophic process of production and reinstatement of its value. On the other, love needs to affirm itself through an act of erasure, a constitutive "forgetfulness" of all the elements that contradict its harmonious and ideal nature. This is its tragic nature. Love is a force doomed to outlive itself, doomed to propagate its ideology while it daily crushes its concrete embodiment.

Because love's destiny is to forget all its tragedies in order to exist, Pasolini pedagogically chooses to insert at the end of the documentary a conclusive remark that

resists a kind of passive acceptance of this state of things. In choosing images of the wedding of a young couple, he states that those who are guilty are not the two young lovers, but rather “those who know and keep silent.” The final wish is thus that in addition to the living of their love, the two lovers would also rise to the “consciousness of their love.”⁹⁵

A Non-Procreative Love: Translating Pasolini’s Politics of Ecology into the Struggle of 1968

What does this consciousness of love entail? In what sense can it be useful to 1968 and its claims? In other words, in what sense can it be translated into the struggle of the new subjectivities, especially the neo-feminism of the 1970s that more consciously worked on the problem of sexuality as a political issue? More specifically, can we draw a connection between Pasolini’s critique of sexuality and that of the family as the matrix for women’s subordination that neo-feminism was elaborating? I believe this is possible only once we clear the ground with regards to Pasolini’s position on a crucial issue such as abortion.

In 1975, Pasolini directly collided with the Movement and especially with neo-feminists by publicly declaring his opposition to the referendum in favor of the liberalization of abortion. Pasolini took his stand in an article published by the *Corriere della Sera* which was titled “I am Against Abortion.” At a first sight, Pasolini’s argument reflects a standard conservative position. He objects to abortion because it is a “petit homicide,” just like “euthanasia,” basing this consideration on the projection of abortion on himself as a potential victim: “I live my prenatal life, my happy immersion in the warmth of my mother’s womb: I know that there I was existing,” thus terminating that life would imply committing homicide.⁹⁶ This

⁹⁵ Betti and Gulinucci, 87.

⁹⁶ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 123, 136.

argument is philosophically weak, and Pasolini will not take it up again in the debate, but it sheds light on his ideological assumptions.

The sacredness of prenatal life echoes Pasolini's superior valuing of what is natural and immediate. Furthermore this is reinforced by the reference to the bond between the mother and child and the mythical wholeness that it expresses. There is not much one can do with it; in existential terms this prenatal wholeness already means death. It is what Enzo Paci called the "dangerousness of myth," that is to say the original alienation born out of the longing and the anxiety for the separation from the womb. But a return to that womb would also be a death, the end of time, the final ceasing of human capacity to choose and invent and reproduce oneself as an autonomous entity. It is movement, change and processes of autonomization that contains value, not the stasis of a symbiotic life. Even in the aesthetic realm, it is not the return to the wholeness of a mythical past that we appreciate, but the movement that the translation of this ideal into the aesthetic form (poetry, novel or films) produces.⁹⁷ The potential that is vital to human life is the transformation of reality, its aesthetic representation as a multiplier of ideas, of concepts that we can actualize in our present condition.

Pasolini's position on abortion can be disproved precisely on the basis of his own thought. When speculating on the nature of montage in film making for instance, he made a much more consistent argument regarding death than his point on abortion. The parallel between film and individual death runs as follows: just like in the final montage of a film, the present of reality becomes a past ordered in cinematic terms, in one's death one finds retrospectively organized the meaning of one's life. It is here that the "chaos of possibilities," of the "relations and meaning without resolution"

⁹⁷ See Enzo Paci, *Dall'Esistenzialismo al Relazionismo* (Messina: G. d'Anna, 1957); Van Watson locates Pasolini's alienation to the not overcoming of the level of the mirror stage as described by Lacan, 7.

becomes a “clear, stable, certain and therefore easily describable past.”⁹⁸ Hence death’s necessity and synoptic value, as Pasolini lapidarily declares: “*death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives.*”⁹⁹ Following the parallel, a film is a meaningful sum total of a life that is dead.¹⁰⁰ Echoing Heidegger’s notion of being toward death and Roland Barthes’ similar connection between image, photography and death, this simile captures the ultimate ungraspable reality of human life. What is structurally outside of it, within the historical and human realm of meaning, thus complicates Pasolini crude condemnation of abortion.

In Pasolini’s thought, the crime of abortion resides in the emptying out of a life that has not been lived. Abortion can thus be accused of creating a heuristically blank experience, a pointless synopsis of nothing. Now here we understand the ground of Pasolini’s fear and the reasons behind his opposition to the legalization of abortion. It is the fear of the nothingness that is to say of a total lack of meaning, of nihilism.¹⁰¹ But this is a fear that only a living subject can have, that is to say somebody who went through a whole set of experiences. It is the projection of life as a social experience on a not-yet-life that constitutes the ground for making abortion a crime. One takes the life history of an existing subject and then casts it on something that is not yet a subject in order to say that that subject’s life has been taken away.

⁹⁸ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 236; on the value of death and its mythical component see also Tommaso Subini, *La necessità di morire. Il cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini e il sacro* (Roma: EDS, 2007).

⁹⁹ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 236.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

¹⁰¹ One might detect here a typical “fear of violent death,” of being killed or of killing, which Allan Bloom posits as the basis of Rousseau’s notion of the bourgeois man. Introduction, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Allan Bloom, trans., (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 5. See also Geoff Waite, “Nietzsche—Rhetoric—Nihilism: every name in history—every style—everything permitted” (A Political Philology of the Last Letter), *Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Philosophy of the Future*, Jeffrey Metzger, ed., (London: Continuum, 2009). Carl Schmitt had made the same point in *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 62-63.

Now this might seem just a trivial philosophical speculation, and although I argue that it invalidates Pasolini's position I want to point out the second, and most important, fallacy. As Laura Betti, Pasolini's beloved friend, told him, what in his reasoning remains "physiologically missing is the woman."¹⁰² There is no consideration of any kind of the woman as a subject, or better said the chief subject in procreation. It is the "Pasolini *qua* fetus" in the warmth of the mother, not a woman who is pregnant, her life, her compromises, her endless work and the pain and dangers she faces. The perfect unity that Pasolini praises is not even remotely gesturing to the other subject of the relationship. The wholesomeness of this state/stasis is partial, because it is unilaterally predicated on the "Pasolini *qua* fetus" and not on the carrier of the latter. The sacredness of life, feminism will show, has always been a code-word for control and disciplining of the women's labor of reproduction, whereas the idea of a sacredness of death as the montage of one's life, and I may add, of the life of a whole society, is a more productive element in Pasolini's thought. If generalized on the whole of society, and sustained by an ethical objective, it may indeed function as a liberating organizational principle.

Pasolini's argument regarding abortion is based also on a further consideration that is more interesting than the one I criticized above. He rejects abortion also because it would "make coitus or heterosexual intercourse easier than what it already is."¹⁰³ As we know from his previous reflection on conformism in *Love Meetings*, this in turn would foment a sexuality already inclined toward heterosexuality, reinforcing homophobic feelings in the population. Furthermore, Pasolini also links what he calls "the tolerance of consumerist power, which requires a total formal elasticity in daily life in order for individuals to become good consumers," and the phobia of popular

¹⁰² Qtd. in Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 142. Other feminist like Dacia Maraini even argued that "for him, feminism merely contributed to the disintegration of the natural order," Van Watson, 17.

¹⁰³ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 124.

classes even in those regions like “Rome, the *Meridione*, Sicily” that were traditionally more tolerant.¹⁰⁴ Sexual liberation is a liberation handed down from above just for the elite of the country, whereas the rest of the population “enjoys a terrible shadow of tolerance” which pushes them toward “intolerance and an almost paranoid fanaticism.”¹⁰⁵

Pasolini’s argument is in this regard more complicated than a standard conservative position that sees in the possibility of interrupting pregnancy the instigation for free unrestrained sex. Echoing feminist slogans, Pasolini affirms that “sexual intercourse is political” and this is the real ground on which to start analyzing the problem of abortion.¹⁰⁶ Once again, since the liberalization of sexuality is caused by the hedonism of mass consumption, it is not liberating in itself, but in fact it enslaves individuals under the rule of a new social conformism. This new sovereignty is accepted by the citizens as liberation. Pasolini argues that under older forms of dominion those who were ruled subjected themselves in a more conscious way. The religious resignation of subaltern groups was in fact a form of awareness, whereas today people simply buy in consumer culture. It is here that indirectly, Pasolini finally identifies a positive, concrete alternative to capitalism. He proposes a platform that could be summarized as an ecological form of non-procreative love. In doing so, Pasolini also seems to break away from his notion of the sacred, from that mythical idea of a sort of regressive utopia outside history.

Pasolini explains that the sacredness of human life is based on the consideration that in an age of scarcity, where productive forces are not developed, “every baby that is born, being a guarantee for life, is blessed.” But today, in a society of abundance, where a growing consumerist society is rapidly destroying the planet’s

¹⁰⁴ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 260, 261.

¹⁰⁵ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 260.

¹⁰⁶ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 126.

physical resources, “every baby that is born instead contributes to the self-destruction of humanity.”¹⁰⁷ The sacredness of life, historically now tied to the material changes of society is, if anything, an ethical principle that is related to the set of behaviors of a given society. But now, Pasolini continues, if our “species wants to survive it must arrange for births not to exceed deaths.”¹⁰⁸ This does not entail that the prohibition of killing vanishes, for it would open to a politics of mass death with sinister resemblance to Nazism. Life is still sacred in its human dimension and it must be protected. This protection demands that certain measures be directed at blocking and moving away from a development based on the mass production and mass consumption of an exponentially growing number of commodities. Pasolini argues that, instead of fighting for free abortion, “it is necessary to fight against such a society at the level of abortion’s cause, in other words, at the level of coitus.”¹⁰⁹ Pasolini advocates educational campaigns of contraception and “alternative love techniques” that do not involve procreation.¹¹⁰ This idea of non-procreative love acknowledges the freedom of sexuality but, by framing and organizing it, makes it consistent to wider social objectives. As Van Watson argues, for Pasolini, a sexual act like “masturbation represents an attempt to unify the self with the self in a libidinal narcissism. Masturbation, like homosexuality, is a non-procreative form of sexual behavior, as neither results in offspring, which would serve as a living reminder of man’s individual mortality.”¹¹¹

Even if based on Malthusian assumptions, Pasolini’s argument represents a delimitation and contextualization of the sacred within the boundaries of concrete human society. Assessing the problem of ecology through the demographic

¹⁰⁷ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 128.

¹⁰⁸ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 128. See also *Lutheran Letters*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 130.

¹¹⁰ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 130.

¹¹¹ Van Watson, 9.

assumptions of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), may lead towards reductionist arguments and solutions, if not to openly discriminating policies which, aiming at fighting overpopulation, impose instead restrictions and inhuman treatments on larger strata of the population, especially women.¹¹² Pasolini's critique is chiefly raised against the new conformism that consumer culture brings about. Furthermore, he is not proposing a simple reduction of population. Hypothetically, if the number of people finally reached a zero, exploitation would not cease and, although it might slow down, the commodification of spaces and individuals would not stop. The social conformism that Pasolini detested so much would not be shaken by such a measure. In short, the problem concerns the type of social relationships connected to the changes in production that Pasolini critiques.

Pasolini's Indirect Critique of Biopolitics

Antonio Negri observed that, while perceiving the passage from a disciplinary form of power to one regulated by a less coercive control, Pasolini could not concretely articulate this transition. He only saw it in terms of homogenization of social practices, that is to say, in terms of a totalitarian and all-comprising conformism that he called fascism. Thus this is Pasolini's "tragedy: with all his learning and theoretical apparatus his [wa]s not capable of taking hold of this transformation." He could only see a negative commodification, whereas precisely in those years the very "body was imagined as a more and more powerful entity, as an energy allowing us to do more things."¹¹³ Without mentioning it, Negri is referring back to the biopolitical

¹¹² See the unfortunate conclusions of an intelligent scholar like Jared Diamond in his bestseller *Collapse. How Society Chooses to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2007) who reduces social conflicts to environmental and population pressure. The work that sparked again the debate on population in the sixties was *The population bomb* written by the biologist Paul R. Ehrlich (New York: Ballantine, 1968).

¹¹³ Antonio Negri, Interview, Cadel, 179; for a positive assessment of Pasolini reading of neocapitalism as Fascism see Gianni Scalia, *La mania della verità. Dialogo con Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bologna: Capelli, 1978), 29-30. Scalia stresses the discovery of the anthropological mutation and Pasolini's

potentiality of labor-power that was rapidly emerging in these years, and that Gramsci had already tried to imagine within the framework of a Fordist society. As I mentioned, there is no awareness of the biopolitical transformation in Pasolini. His humanism prevents him from elaborate a theory of the evolution of labor-power, whereas Gramsci was able to do it thanks to his rudimentary understanding of the abstraction of the content of human labor. For Pasolini humanism was indeed “a signifier of human resistance against the postindustrial nightmare” and the receptacle of a set of values that made it a timeless and utopian entity.¹¹⁴ As the case of the prosopopoeia of the teacups attests, the superseding of any human content is for Pasolini an ultimately degrading consequence of development.

That said, Pasolini’s early attempt to imagine an ecological perspective that could establish a different order from the entropy of consumer society, and a critique of the incorporation of the biopolitical powers of the body are in actual fact the most decisive. Now that the potentiality of the bodies and minds have been tamed and put at work by post-Fordist forms of production, Pasolini’s understanding of how capitalism produces a “false tolerance of the new totalitarian power” becomes crucial.¹¹⁵ Especially when he links sexual liberalization to consumer culture, Pasolini becomes a necessary supplement to what Gramsci had said about the link between production and reproduction.¹¹⁶ He takes into account the stabilizing power of consumption which Gramsci did not resolve and, at the same time, Pasolini also registers the changes in

understanding of the changes in the social relations that neocapitalism brings about, what seems to be lacking still is the subjective element which drives however ambiguously this transformation.

¹¹⁴ Viano, 4.

¹¹⁵ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, 130.

¹¹⁶ Pasolini had in fact direct experience of the forms of cooptation of sexuality by consumer culture, as his famous “Trilogy of life” became the spin off of a whole series of soft-porn movies. He realized that “human body and its inherent instincts and drives could [not] be safeguarded from authority or from power.” Ryan-Scheutz, 201. This is the reason why *Saló* becomes the last fortress against capitalist commodification.

the link between production and reproduction that brought about a superseding of the previous Fordist phase and its social organizations, i.e. Gramsci's Fordist family.

We need to continue to hold open the dialectic movement. Just as consumption uses temporary satisfaction to increase libidinal attachment to commodities, there are elements of oppression that certainly function as mechanisms channeling energies and needs into further dependency. At the same time, however, there are also new spaces of freedom, where the level of struggle of different subjectivities determines important progress for society. This is the other side of the coin that Pasolini does not see. Yet, once we adopt Pasolini's ecological insight and the sacredness of death as the mobilizing principle capable to preserve and extend the time we were given on this planet, we may capture also the kind of freedom and solidarity we need in order to shape our collective life.

In this Pasolini comes paradoxically close to what the feminists were arguing even if from the opposite side of the debate. A society progressively organized around the principle of non-procreative love would undermine the institution of the family that feminism recognizes as the place where a large amount of hidden labor is exploited to fuel capital's growth. Moreover, his stark critique of consumerism as the force that fuels productive growth and thus destroys the environment can be used as a new theoretical weapon for the neo-feminism reflection on capitalism and women's oppression. Once the first phase of the struggle to radicalize capital's contradictions and make it collapse because of its own incapacity to respond to social problems is neutralized, the ecological limit that Pasolini sets as a priority emerges as the new final accomplishment also for feminist discourse. Writers like Mariarosa Dalla Costa for instance, would come to a similar conclusion in recent years; others like Silvia Federici will come close to embracing conservationist ideas on older forms of

collective life.¹¹⁷ What is in an embryonic state in Pasolini's troublesome confrontation with Italian society and its transformation are the seeds for a possible solution for our contemporary social problem. This solution would be a radical transformation guided by the full assumption of the ecologically pending catastrophe determined by our model of development and social practices. When I say guiding principle, I refer to Pasolini's idea of *the necessity of death*, however extending it to the whole of our society. If we assume our mortality as a collective fact, and let us call it with its proper name, that is extinction, and in Pasolini's sense as the final moment that gives meaning to our life, if we do so the ethical principles that we are in need of might well grow organically before our eyes. They would spring from the idea of a global solidarity when facing our individual and collective destiny of death. These principles would obviously have to be patiently and democratically assembled and developed in order to produce a new good common sense. In short, the sacredness of our death might tell us much more about how to live than does the sacredness of life.

In conclusion, my use of Pasolini thus is based on his "laterality," or better in his capacity to engender thought "in difference."¹¹⁸ His methodological value thus is the following: his dialectics conjures up negation as alterity which does not engender any synthesis, not even a temporary one. As Viano remarks, Pasolini's "myth of innocence is a mere projection. It projects an ideal alterity onto the backs of people who do not have a chance to understand, negotiate, or refute the role into which they are forced."¹¹⁹ In dialectical terms, it is indeed more an abstract thesis that knows no development than a concrete antithesis or as Gianni Scalia calls it a "non-dialectical

¹¹⁷ See Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "The Native In Us, the Earth We Belong To," *The Commoner* 6 (2003): 1-32; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

¹¹⁸ *Sessantotto. L'utopia della realtà* Dir. Ferdinando Vincentini Orgnani. L'Unità, 2008.

¹¹⁹ Viano, 7.

contradiction.”¹²⁰ It is what remains from the movement forward of civilization. It is the residue that has been negated by development. In itself this element is irretrievable, but it signals a useful, let us say even corrective element in my argument regarding biopolitics. Pasolini, it’s clear, completely ignores the biopolitical because he disregards the category of labor-power. Stressing its final subsumption under capital, Pasolini does not see the agency involved in the potentiality of labor-power. However, it is precisely this pessimistic, catastrophic closure that expresses the need for an alterity to its incorporation. Pasolini’s exigency for alterity can be reformulated through the principle of immanent finitization. The open process of finitization is kept in motion by what societies choose to frame as their general problem. A clear understanding of the problem organically produces responses or new social experiments as the problem-solving activity that aims to overcome social contradictions. It is in short what Deleuze called ideas.¹²¹ The Councils were the result of the understanding of the problem of wage-labor in an age of scarcity. As I will show, the politicization of the private sphere would be the way feminist social praxis reinstated the problem of production on the base of gender difference. Pasolini’s claim for the centrality of ecology is the first step in elaborating our current most pressing problem. Understanding alterity as the relational bound that we have with the planet is today’s crucial task. It is difficult of course and one shall not fall into Pasolini’s projection of a mythical past and of an immovable antithetical/thesis. The planet’s alterity is in the end a relational concept and humans constitute the immanent horizon that has to be addressed. It is in fact the assumption of our individual and collective mortality that must be used as a ethical and almost epistemological principle. The planet will outlive our species. Life, in a different form, will be

¹²⁰ *La mania della verità*, 13.

¹²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference & Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 202.

regenerated independently from our surprising capacity to exploit and destroy resources. Rather than committing a global suicide to maintain the luxury of a few, we should instead live as long and as peacefully as we can, accept our destiny: extinction as the ultimate horizon. Our attitude toward it, our dignity and solidarity as well as the last and most human trait in the final montage of our life as a species is what matters.

CHAPTER 3

1968-1977: THE MOVEMENT AND ITS BIOPOLITICAL ÉLAN

The Leipzig proletarian of literature who assembles books (such as compendia of political economy) under the direction of his publisher is a *productive worker*, for his production is from the outset subsumed under capital, and only takes place so that capital may valorize itself. A singer who sells her songs on her own account is an *unproductive worker*. But the same singer, engaged by an impresario, who has her sing in order to make money, is a *productive worker*. For she produces capital.

(K. Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*)

3.1 The First Spark: 1968 and the School

In the previous chapter, Pasolini served as a critical counterpoint to define the claims made by 1968. I now want to scrutinize the Movement and its legacy. However, since a comprehensive analysis of such a heterogeneous phenomenon like 1968 is a virtually impossible task for one writing and, let alone, for a single person, I propose to study it by employing three key perspectives. These three interconnected views can also be read as responses to Pasolini's critique and are grounded in the biopolitical transformation the Movement helped producing through the intensification of the struggle at the level of labor-power. In so doing the Movement gave voice and helped bringing about antagonist subjectivities like students (or the intellectual workers), workers and women. In this chapter, however, I will mainly explore the transformations brought forward by the Students' and the Workers' Movement, while leaving for the next chapter the treatment of women and their specific contributions.

The three elements of 1968 I privilege are the following: 1) the origin of the Movement, i.e. the political and social contradictions of the economic growth of post-war Italy that generated its claims and protests; 2) the Movement's awareness of the capacity of consumer society to assimilate subjectivities and critique as a fundamental part of its politics and practice; 3) the Movement's struggle to redefine the hierarchical structure of knowledge and power which, on the one hand, promoted the secularization of Italian society, and on the other, determined a new global and syncretic approach to cultural phenomena. That this attitude was later neutralized and converted into an extremely convenient and profitable mass culture is in fact more the result of a defeat than of the Movement's own struggle. This parallels the re-organization of production elaborated by the Factory Councils that was partly used against them in the subsequent Fordist rationalization of production. I will address these questions individually.

Finally, I want to call attention to the *centrality of reproduction* in 1968 thought and demonstrate how the biopolitical dimension of labor-power was foregrounded. This will be clear, for instance, in capital's employment of larger quotas of intellectual work among the new generations and in the practice of *refusal of work* that produced innovative forms of struggle which aimed at solving the problem of the new social needs that were arising. The literatures that came out of the last cycle of revolts, which has become known as the 1977 Movement are the culmination of this process of intensification of reproduction and what's more fully display the layout of the biopolitical transformation. I will argue that this is particularly true for the Bolognese side of the movement as in the case of the collective work *Alice disambientata* (1978) (Displaced Alice), and the novel *Boccalone* (1977) (Big Mouth) by Enrico Palandri.

The Historical Political Context

When Pasolini claimed that “the student revolt was born overnight,” he overlooked one fact that the overwhelming majority of historians now agree upon.¹ The long wave of social unrest that exploded in the spring of 1968 and continued in the “hot autumn” of 1969 was not an incidental, spontaneous event, but rather it was deeply rooted in a series of struggles that had begun at least eight years before. These were connected to deep changes at a social, political and cultural level. “The so-called economic miracle was attained on the basis of increases in productivity much greater than increases in wages;” based on internal migration “of labor from the south to the northern cities” it in fact “aggravated social tensions, making existing political

¹ Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milano: Garzanti, 1975), 37. Because of this I agree with Piperno's remark on the great chance that Pasolini missed for the lack of a true understanding “of the radical symbolic transformation that took place in those years,” thus becoming also the “great missed poet of 1968.” Franco Piperno, *1968 L'anno che ritorna* (Roma: Rizzoli, 2008), 26.

arrangements untenable.”² The Student Movement thus “placed on the agenda the possibility of an effective worker-student alliance the likes of which campus radicals elsewhere could only dream.”³

From a political point of view, the crisis and the first signs of social unrest began at least in July 1960, when the Tambroni government supported by the Fascist Party (MSI, Movimento Sociale Italiano) faced a strong popular opposition that resulted in the killing of protesters in Genoa and Reggio Emilia. The political agreement at a national level paved the way for the Socialist Party to politically support the Christian Democrats in the governing of the country. The entrance of the PSI in the government changed the political geography of Italy, since from World War I, the Socialists had always maintained an autonomous but clear alliance with the PCI. As a result a new project of modernization of the state and its infrastructures was laid out which challenged directly the same leftist reforms upheld by the PCI. As the Italian industrial production was booming, this *economic miracle* seemed to satisfy everybody: the Christian Democrats benefited politically from it; the official left as well, although criticizing the forms and the directions of the development, agreed on the need of industrializing and modernizing the country.

The years of the so called “center-left government” had further consequences, since as Sidney Tarrow has noted, “the prospect of joining the government led the PSI to put reforms on its political agenda – education, planning, and pension reform – which later become rallying points for mass protest.”⁴ It is precisely from the high

² Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency. Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), 14.

³ Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven. Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 89.

⁴ Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder. Protest and Politics in Italy 1965-1975* (Oxford: Calderon Press, 1989), 53. See also Gian Giacomo Migone, “Il caso Italiano e il contesto internazionale,” *La cultura e i luoghi del '68*, Aldo Agosti, Luisa Passerini and Nicola Tranfaglia, eds., (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1991), 15-16.

expectations triggered by the new government that the Movement found its first points of unity. Undoubtedly the protest against the reform of education represented the first and most critical of these points of contention.

The baby boom of the post-war years produced a higher demand for instruction that the old educational system could not provide in terms of structures and quality of teaching. The school reform proposed by Minister Luigi Gui was the inadequate response that the centre-left government devised. The reform raised some expectations, but immediately afterwards, because of delays and the weakness of its proposal frustrated them. As well the effect was to generate a widespread disappointment that sparked protests.⁵ So if the students' first claims focused on very practical needs, like classrooms and laboratories, soon enough larger and more fundamental issues were called into question. One concession that the Gui reform made was to allow a student representative to sit on school boards expressing a mere advisory opinion. The hypocritical nature of this acknowledgment "initiated the struggle for student power against the authoritarianism of the *baroni*," i.e. the faculty elite.⁶ Soon enough it became clear that this apparent democratization of Italian society, i.e. the liberalization of the access to education, was not simply a concession but responded to particular exigencies of Italian capitalism.

The findings of independent researches studying the connection between school and industrial production disclosed that with the new phase of mass education, "school in Italy was functional for the choices of capitalist development, that is to say keeping out of the labor market a consistent quota of potential working force in order

⁵ On the school reform see Serena Sani, *La politica scolastica del centro-sinistra (1962-1968)* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2000); Lumley, 49-59.

⁶ Rosanna Emma and Marco Rostan, *Scuola e mercato del lavoro* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1971), 110. On the authoritarianism of the Italian school system see Alberto Alberti, Giorgio Bini, Lucio Del Cornò, Gabriele Giannantoni *L'autoritarismo nella scuola* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1969); Antonietta Chiama, Jolanda Molinar, Cesare Panciola et. alt., eds., *Chi insegna a chi? Cronache della repressione nella scuola* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972).

to avoid an explosive pressure on the latter.”⁷ By the beginning of the 1960s, the economic boom of the late 1950s was already deflating. If industrial production increased on average by 10.1% per year and investments by 13.8%, by 1963 employment rates inverted their tendency and started to fall, which created a greater number of unproductive workforce. It was a mass of relatively more educated men and women who could not find employment in the industry and had no jobs.⁸ The service sector and school temporarily absorbed this demographic surplus.

With the Gui reform and the law passed in the subsequent years, the government instituted a series of liberalizations of access to education for larger sectors of the population, while leaving dramatically untouched the material, and financially more burdensome necessities of building new schools and reducing of the student-teacher ratio. For instance, in 1961 the access to university was extended to all high school graduates who pursued five-year diplomas (including vocational institutions). By 1967 enrollment had doubled, with universities receiving a massive inflow of people who were pursuing degrees in the hope of climbing the social ladder.

Simultaneously, the institutions enforced a strict selectivity producing high rates of school drop outs.⁹ Since the Casati reform (1859) that had unified the educational systems of the various Italian states (and thus founded the national school system), a strict selectivity, if not discrimination, had been a hallmark of the Italian educational system.¹⁰ But now that Italian society embraced democracy and recognized in its Constitution the right to education for all citizens, selectivity began to appear more and more contradictory. Students quickly developed a new awareness

⁷ Emma and Rostan, 69.

⁸ See Emma and Marco Rostan, 13-58.

⁹ See Emma and Marco Rostan, 80-83.

¹⁰ On the history of the Italian school system see Giuseppe Inzerillo, *Storia della politica scolastica in Italia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1974); Giuseppe Natale, Francesco Paolo Colucci, Antonino Natoli, *La scuola in Italia. Dalla legge Casati del 1859 ai decreti delegati* (Milano: Mazzotta Editore, 1975).

of the social dynamics behind these rigid standards. In a collective work which gathered the experience of three years of struggle within the secondary school system, the Student Movement of Milan drew a parallel between the family and the school and their complementary role in society. The family was the primary locus of a “natural selection” in a pre-capitalist state; it tied the individuals to the role in society their parents had and froze social mobility. In a modern state, the school system provided a new and more refined “class selection” that varied “according to the needs of the mode of production.”¹¹ Derived by a purely theoretical reading of Marx, this passage is rather mechanical and misses the needs and goals of the Italian 1960s economy. Still in its generous effort, it points to the widespread realization that the school system was not something dysfunctional, but rather it was functional for the capitalist plan.

The Student Movement of Milan was just one of the various groups born out of 1968. Discussions and divergences between these various groups were common, but ultimately they all drew on an application of Marxist readings to the context of the Italian modernization. Even though the general setting up of the analysis was declared surpassed by the students who wrote it, the so called “Sapienza Theses” codified the idea that the university represented “the mediated expression of a plan organic to capital,” and that the *student assembly* had sovereign power, “thus refusing the principle of delegation of authority to any other restricted organism.”¹² These were the two elements that unified the Movement as they were popularized by the Pisan students in 1967. In a second drafting of the Sapienza Theses, the understanding of the student as work force subordinated to capitalism was heightened. As Steve Wright remarks, the attempts to “grasp the nature of intellectual labor” is one of the most “distinctive” trait of this later document in that it made clear that “the student was

¹¹ Comitato di Agitazione Studentesco Medio di Milano, *Scuola, studenti e proletari* (Milano: Edizioni CLUED, 1973), 20.

¹² “Le tesi della «Sapienza»,” *Il mulino* 4-5 (1967): 377-390.

already a proletarian by virtue of a subordinate location within the university division of labor.” In fact, “to the extent that existing stipends became a fully-fledged-wage, she would be transformed from impure social figure on the margins of the valorization process into a fully-fledged wage worker producing surplus-value.”¹³

In a famous essay penned by Mauro Rostagno: “*Università come istituto produttivo*” (University as a Productive Company), *Potere Studentesco* (Student Power), which was at odds with the Milan Student Movement, echoed a similar, though more refined position. Quoting the famous economist and friend of Gramsci, Piero Sraffa, Rostagno argued that the university operates as a regular business company carrying out a process of “production of commodities by means of commodities.” The commodity produced is the student whose principal trait is that he or she is “sold on the labor market either during the productive process (i.e. the study period) as a semi-processed good (i.e. as a student-worker), or at the end of the process as a finished product (i.e. the graduate).”¹⁴ Thus against an apparatus that leaves no escape from the commodification of its own subjects, the Movement can “only react by organizing an alternative and opposite power.” However, the forms this counter-power has to take up are ultimately left to the students’ “willingness to struggle” and critique the foundations of the university system.¹⁵ Rostagno’s analysis of education as a self-generating system is symptomatic of the departure from the productivist take of the official left. Drawing attention to the significance of reproduction over material production, the students recognized the strategic role that education played in modern society.

¹³ Gian Mario Cazzaniga, “Le tesi della Sapienza,” *Università: ipotesi rivoluzionaria*, 177 [translation by Wright, 95].

¹⁴ Mauro Rostagno, “Università come istituto produttivo,” *Università: ipotesi rivoluzionaria* (Padova: Marsilio Editori, 1968), 49, 42.

¹⁵ Rostagno, 51.

Further articulating Rostagno's analysis, Guido Viale, who was active in the Student Movement of the University of Turin and was later a leader of *Lotta Continua*, wrote in a famous piece titled "*Contro l'università*" (Against the University), that the ground of the university establishment was authoritarianism in its multifaceted forms. With authoritarianism Viale did not refer only to the absence of democratic rights for the students, let alone any recognition of their active role in the educational process, but rather to the perfect mechanism that inhibited any critical capacity channeling it into the outlet of "one's own frustrations," petty claims and private recriminations. Thus, Viale maintained that the "collective dimension of criticism" had to be undercut and excluded from the system of production and transmission of knowledge.¹⁶ This lack of a collegial and cooperative exchange was far more paralyzing than the often-addressed question of the updating of pedagogy, curriculum reform, and the liberalization of the access to higher education. Along with the absence of functioning structures like laboratories and classrooms, it prevented the university from producing what the country needed the most: a critical form of knowledge that could stand up to the challenge of a fast and chaotic modernization.

The pressure of these unresolved contradictions and the clear unwillingness of the political leadership of the country to respond to them fuelled the student protest. Students did not limit themselves to reformist claims, but attacked the whole structure of the school system and its government. Along with the Università La Sapienza in Rome, the universities of Trento and Pisa were hotbeds of this early cycle of contestations. As a young student coming to study in Pisa from Naples, Cesare Moreno recalls that it was the science students who moved first: "the children of the

¹⁶ Guido Viale, "Contro l'Università," *Università: ipotesi rivoluzionaria*, 100. Viale also remembers that "the insistence on the everyday aspects of life within the institutions (dissecting in their tiniest details the forms of oppression in which the relationship between student and culture took shape) was a collective activity." Qtd. in Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy, 1968* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 82.

post-War years were entering the university, enrolments were increasing but the structures were not adjusting. In December 1966, the first occupation of the Physics department was decided because of internal problems, not because of political reasons. We were asking for more laboratories, classrooms.”¹⁷ In the fall of 1967 Trento and Palermo were also the site of a series of occupations that reached its climax with the taking of Palazzo Capanna in Turin. When the echoes of the Days of May in France spread over Italy, the Movement gained momentum, coalescing around other global protests like the one against the Vietnam War. Students received vital theoretical inputs also from the Chinese Cultural Revolution, even though it was already in its declining phase. But it was the impressive series of workers strikes of the “hot autumn” of 1968 that fuelled the protest connecting the Movement to the struggles in the factories.

What interests us here, though, is the specific content of the analysis and practice the Italian 1968 brought forward. This leads us to the understanding of the new biopolitical dimension that the Movement brought to the foreground. As I noted earlier, education was the first battleground. The form and content of teaching, hierarchical transmission of knowledge and the subject matter of that very knowledge were all drastically criticized and brought into question. It was not simply a problem of the backwardness and lack of proper structures; rather what was at stake was *what* was taught and *how* it was taught. The whole pedagogical field was politicized, and turned upside down. The agents of this revolution were the students who, despite the heterogeneity of their groups, carried out their plan following a shared route. Like the councils in the 1920s and “the hot autumn,” *the assembly* represented the organizational form of their autonomous political practice and because of this

¹⁷ Qtd. in Aldo Cazzullo, *I ragazzi che volevano fare la rivoluzione. 1968-1978: storia di Lotta continua* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 43.

institutions never refuse to acknowledge them. There were no delegates or representative body. Formed and run by those who participated in it, the assembly embodied the direct decision-making mechanism of the Movement. The refusal to delegate power meant the definition of “politics as direct intervention into reality, of history as present, that is a collective and autonomous political praxis internal to the institutions (the struggle against the school) whose objectives [were] functional to the growth of the Movement.”¹⁸

The difficulties of such a project were not small. Managing lengthy meetings over time proved troublesome, especially when it concerned assuring everybody of the concrete possibility of having a saying in the decision-making. Women for instance, realized very soon how difficult it was for them to count in the organization without being confined to secretarial roles. As Laura Derossi, a highly respected militant in the Student Movement Turin, recalls “the hardest thing was speaking in the great hall, overflowing with more than five hundred students, and making a speech from the cathedra. Even the men, there weren’t many who could do it.”¹⁹ Furthermore, “the absence of any institutional acknowledgment of forms of authority highlighted the role of charismatic figures,” so that the debate was usually monopolized by the eloquence of the leaders of the different organizations.²⁰ Yet it is true that the emphasis that the Movement placed on the types of organization and interaction was unmatched in its attempt to break away from hierarchical and authoritarian forms of the political life of the time. Perhaps only temporarily, the possibility of a new comprehensive social life with which the Movement experimented pierced through the fog of the degradation of Italy’s industrial development. As a self-regenerative practice which denied any

¹⁸ Commissione studenti lavoratori, ed., “Materiali del movimento studentesco,” *Che fare?* 4 (1968-1969): 97.

¹⁹ Qtd. in Passerini, 97.

²⁰ Passerini, 63. See also Luciano Della Mea, *Proletari senza comunismo. Lotta di classe e lotta continua* (Verona: Bertani Editore, 1972), 111-113.

dualistic dimension of power, 1968 is truly the first moment of a collective display of the biopolitical potential of modern society. This potential resided in the full assumption of the task of investigating, critiquing and thus re-orienting reproduction. The intellectual and material capacities of labor-power were then directed toward their own critical development, in a virtuous cycle of study, critique and practice.

The theoretical break with regards to the official ideology of the left was profound. The politicization of reproduction signified in fact a crucial update of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis. Against the essentially productivist ideology of the PCI, the re-discovery of the central role played by reproduction echoed Gramsci's critique of the mechanistic Marxism of Bukharin I mentioned in chapter one.²¹ As Mangano and Schina argued, the radical critique of the Movement thus produced an understanding of social life not grounded in "the separation between what is normally considered as structure and what, by exclusion, is defined as superstructure, but in the great issue of social reproduction of class relationships."²² The students' rupture rendered fluid again a rigidly mechanistic interpretation of social change. If the PCI had assimilated the idea that an ameliorated form of development automatically generated progress for the working class, the Movement tore apart this fanciful belief, exposing the reality of exploitation and suffering that also the realm of reproduction generated. Writing on May 1968 in France, Alain Touraine had clearly pointed out the crucial positionality of students in an advanced capitalist society. He argued that for the first time "education [...] had become a factor of production and decisive growth, not merely the transmission of cultural heritage." It is on this account that students express the contradiction of a new phase of accumulation of capital, since they became

²¹ See Chapter 1, 77.

²² Attilio Mangano and Antonio Schina, *Le culture del Sessantotto : gli anni sessanta le riviste il movimento* (Pistoia: Centro di documentazione, 1989), 89; for an assessment of the problem that this update of the theory of praxis brings about see also 96-98.

“the representatives of all those who suffer more from social integration and cultural manipulation directed by the economic structures than by economic exploitation and material misery.”²³ Furthermore, the Movement also made clear that the capitalist use of technology improved only quantitatively the standards of living – and in fact actually extended and made more intolerable daily life. It is here that the Movement conducted its struggle. It is at the level of reproduction that it creatively carried out its cultural revolution.

Against Pedagogy and the Illusory Transformation of the Institutions

From the rejection of the old system of cultural transmission, the Student Movement quickly elaborated a counter-system, a platform of the new knowledge that a liberated school system had to produce. Meanwhile, the government made some concessions in the attempt to appease the students. The 1974 “Decreti Delegati” established that non-academic staff, students and parents were active subjects in the management of the school. But probably the most significant result the students and workers protest obtained was the so-called *150 ore* [150 hours program]. This educational program was designed to give free secondary education to people who had not had access to it, or university training to those who only had secondary school diplomas. By 1974, the experiment involved about 17,000 workers taking classes at secondary education institutions and about 1500 at the university.²⁴ Handed out as a standard reform redistributing quotas of knowledge among lower classes, the Student Movement fought hard to infuse it with an innovative potential.

²³ Alain Touraine, *The May Movement. Revolt and Reform* (New York: Random House, 1971), 355.

²⁴ Antonio Lettieri, “150 ore: strategia operaia e scienza,” *Sapere* 774 (1974): 89; on the Decreti Delegati see Rinaldo Rizzi, *La scuola dopo i decreti delegati* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1975).

School is not required to dispense a set of notions, but rather to become the locus of a permanent testing whose protagonists are the carriers of that experience and not the depository of a science that is claimed to be unbiased. The 150 hours program is the continuation and extension of the struggle for increasing the power of the workers in the factory and in society. By power we mean the capacity to directly participate in the analysis of the situation, of the social relations and of the relations of production, and thus in their mutation.²⁵

For the students and the workers who had obtained these basic concessions, it was clear that the latter could have easily been turned into instruments of further oppression. The goals and the practice of these institutions drastically changed and diverted from a simple vocational training. Disconnected from a critical education, training workers meant only, in fact, preparing them to enter the new factory run by a more sophisticated automation system which delivered higher rates of productivity. The Movement knew only too well that this form of acculturation was practical in the worst sense of the word. It ameliorated workers' conditions in order to achieve further exploitation. To break away from it, the verticality of the transmission of knowledge had to be smashed. Instead of the handing down of notions, the new horizontal configuration had to endorse a co-production of learning. The break between the elaboration of knowledge and its diffusion had to be recomposed and reintegrated in a new dimension which fused theory and practice.

²⁵ Lettieri, 88.

Gramsci here is once again the great inspirer and theoretical guide for the reinvigoration of a alternative, critical culture. Compare, for instance, the argument the Student Movement made on the 150 hours program with the re-reading of Gramsci's critique of the Turin popular universities which the Socialist Party established as a counter-institution for the education of the lower strata of the population. Reconstructing the debate of post-World War I Socialist cultural politics, Gianni Scalia writes that "Gramsci questions the quality and the structure of popular universities precisely because they are not culturally free and socially determined, i.e. class oriented. [...] The critique of popular universities rests on these two points: one dealing with their scientific inadequacy and one with their democratic, social and thus political inaptness."²⁶

Contrary to what happens in capitalist society, in a socialist environment theory and practice have to be interconnected. Gramsci felt that instead of being infused with the contents of concrete social practice, the theory and teaching imparted by popular Universities remained separated from concrete life and did not generate any new knowledge or re-frame in a proletarian perspective the set of truths elaborated by the bourgeoisies. Scalia takes up Gramsci's polemics precisely because of the lack of a true, and as I will argue, immanent theoretical component of modern education. Thus he can draw a parallel between the attempt to "popularize" education in post-World War I Turin and the Government's attempt at reforming the Italian educational system. Gramsci's critique lays out a set of problems that, in a different context, the Student Movement was indeed confronting. This critique entails an understanding of instruction that, in its democratic and class-oriented functioning, collectively produces a shared and socially useful knowledge. How was this thought developed? To see how

²⁶ Gianni Scalia, "Il giovane Gramsci," *Passato e Presente* 9 (1959): 1140. The idea of "learning through social practice," one that Robert Lumley calls "substitutionalist" was dropped by the PCI and the unions at the beginning of the 1960's, when "a statist strategy prevailed," 51.

I want to explore the transformation of the educational school system promoted by the centre-left and how the Movement undercut it.

Student protests and the various governmental acts passed in the 1960s shook the foundations of the Italian school. One could call this transformation a crisis and it was certainly perceived as such by those who lived and worked in the school. Crisis though also meant change and experimentation, and to be sure, pedagogy became the area where the shifts were felt the most and had long lasting consequences for the years to come. Let's consider for one moment pedagogy and then let's attempt to frame its crisis in the larger picture of the modernization of Italian society. If in the sciences, the specialization and mechanization of knowledge were more consonant with the restructuring of the system of production, in the humanities the application of this logic was more difficult and thus frictions and resistances became more noticeable.

Historically, Italian humanistic education performed the function of reproducing elites: be they merely intellectuals or, more concretely, political power groups, these elites were not expected to have any sort of practical occupation, let alone marketability. However, now that the access to this niche of unproductive labor was opened to the masses, its very *raison d'être* was called into question. Not even the widespread policy of patronage of the Italian state could, nor was it willing to, absorb the mass of intellectual groups that were knocking at the door of power.

The fact that the humanities operated merely as places where reserve labor force was kept in store became evident to the large majority of the students as soon as they entered the university system. These young men and women had no real prospects in the job market. All they could hope for was to become teachers in high schools, where all their learning had to be distilled in old-fashioned curricula. In short, in the humanities more than anywhere else, the notion of acculturation was put into

question by the everyday realization that the university was in fact producing “retrogression” against “specialist selection” in the sciences.²⁷

Speaking about the insights of a worker science, Mario Tronti had said that “knowledge is tied to struggle. Who knows truly hates truly.”²⁸ The same can be said for the students. Discovering their destiny as “victims manipulated and rendered functional to the system,” the students revolted and this revolt became “*their discovery of the world*.”²⁹ As the students’ organization grew in number and in its capacity to unveil disciplinary mechanisms, the spectacular expression of their discontent raised concerns in the government and did not go unnoticed. The system had to respond in order to stabilize these potent pressures. In the humanities, the solution adopted was a chaotic shift towards the innovation of teaching and the opening of new disciplines. The birth of the University of Trento, one of the few private institutions in Italy, specializing in sociology, was probably the most interesting and groundbreaking experiment in this sense. Innovating standard curricula, the University of Trento was the first to import the achievements of the most advanced Anglo-Saxon and North-American sociological schools which had so far received scant attention in Italy. However, against the intentions of its creators, such as Christian Democrat Flaminio Piccoli (1915-2000), Trento turned into one of the most turbulent environments for student contestation. It was precisely Trento’s innovative approach that attracted all those students who were escaping the suffocating cage of standard university programs. Marco Boato and Mauro Rostagno started their political activism here, and Renato Curcio, who later founded the terrorist group *Brigate Rosse* [Red Brigades] studied at Trento as well. Marco Boato recalls:

²⁷ Arcangelo Leone De Castris, ed., *Ideologia letteraria e scuola di massa. Per un’analisi sociale dell’organizzazione didattica* (Bari: De Donato, 1975), 11.

²⁸ Qtd. in Wright, 82.

²⁹ Roberto Di Marco, “Per un’analisi dialettica della contraddizione universitaria,” *Che fare?* 4 (1968-1969): 106.

From education demands we went to laying claims to the transformation of society in a revolutionary direction. We became Marxist without ever have been Stalinist or dogmatic. Marxist tradition reached us through the Frankfurt School of Adorno, Lacan's psychoanalysis, Wright Mills sociology. We established contacts with factories: Michelin in Trento, Marzotto in Valdagno, and other universities.

The microcosm of Trento as the involuntary breeding ground of revolts shows how the Movement was keen on detecting the contradictions that were shaking Italian society, and using them in order to launch its attack on the kind of modernization the elite had in mind for the country. Let us turn now to another concrete solution that the university, at a national level, put into play in order to buffer the revolutionary drive. The reform of the teaching of the humanities is exemplary.

Against Croce and the New Formalism

The Student Movement certainly did not oppose the democratizing of the oppressive and backward pedagogical methods of the time, but it soon realized that if the "old identity" of the university institution was fading away, a "new social identity" was not emerging.³⁰ The old identity of the Italian Humanities was one built around the Croce and Gentile legacy: a historical model with a precise idea of what was literarily valuable, historically true and what was not. It was also a model which

³⁰ De Castris, 39.

placed art's fundamental value in its separateness, which described it as a disinterested form of acculturation.

The progress of technology and the decline of the primacy of the humanities undermined the neo-idealist unitary system and paved the way for a flourishing of new methodologies which were probably more tolerant and pluralistic (though still fostering a formalism that had little connection with the material contradictions that were fomenting the change). Making reference to the new trends of structuralism, sociological approaches, Arcangelo Leone De Castris argued that “in replacing the traditional psychological approach,” the new wave of pedagogical experimentalism, with its “formalistic interpretation of literary history, in actual fact updates the old [idealist] supremacy re-proposing it on the base of a scientific description of value.”³¹ The fragmentation of the field of humanism from the outset looked more pluralistic, but the heterogeneity of the methods was simply integrating within the state institution (i.e. within the university) the “generic and spontaneous contradictions of society” without examining them. The disconnected plurality of this supposedly interdisciplinarity thus represented a mere “hopeless alternative to [the university] crisis.”³²

In contrast, a positive transformation of the curricula and the institution itself would have entailed a redistribution of power and a new orientation in the academic research. Even scientific work had now to aim at investigating a specific social object which served also as a methodological control for the understanding of the transformation at work in society. This is the truly innovative reform of the university as institution: from the unproductive storage of reserve labor and passive registering of

³¹ De Castris, 31.

³² De Castris, 38.

social disaggregation to an active and “political role” of its cultural production and generation of knowledge.³³

The magazine *Che Fare?*, for instance, predicated this practice also in the field of culture and literature. Even though *Che Fare?* talked extensively of poetry and literature, it made clear that culture in capitalist society is “not a value” in itself, but only as a “commodity and as production of commodity.” In this sense culture is thus cognitively useless. It is a fetish, but if it becomes, as the magazine tried to make it, “a social practice of determinate negation of the capitalist system” it truly embodies a practical-critical valuable tool.³⁴ This critical but comprehensive approach based on a distinct materialist perspective would play a major role also in other fields.

Recomposing the Field of Knowledge: Science, Epistemology and Mao

The outcomes of the Movement’s analysis were also visible in the scientific field. The chief goal for the Movement was to critique the objectiveness of science and thus to produce a paradigmatic change in the understanding of the production of scientific knowledge. The Chemist Student Collective of the Polytechnic of Milan, for instance, declared that the division of the cultural field into disciplines had to be recomposed “substituting the latter through thematic investigations. In this way general principles are induced from concrete reality. Every issue is assessed from several points of view, included that of the relationship with social reality.”³⁵ The

³³ De Castris, 38. One last and more general remark regarding the debate between Pasolini and the Movement with regard to knowledge. Contrary to what individual behaviors might have suggested, the radical *no* that the poet found expressed indeterminately in the new generation was instead quite concrete. Borrowing Adorno’s philosophical concept, many intellectuals spoke indeed of a *determinate negation* that the protest had to produce.

³⁴ “Intervento del gruppo promotore della rivista «Che Fare» in sei paragrafi,” *Che fare?* 5 (1969): 85. At an epistemological level, De Castris argued “no science can be more comprehensive and positive of this critique [...] It is the determinate negation of ideological values of the reality that *expresses* a *positive* knowledge of *real values*; that is to say of the social dialectic that in those values appeared as transcended or distorted,” 25.

³⁵ Collettivo Universitario Studenti Chimici della Facoltà di Ingegneria del Politecnico di Milano, “Controcorsso universitario e operaio su Porto Marghera,” *Sapere*, 774 (1974): 28; see also Catia Papa,

mystified nature of technology thus was disclosed as a socially determined operation directed not completely towards universal truth, but mostly driven by profit-making and reason of state.

A group of scientists and intellectuals such as the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia, the biologist Ettore Tibaldi, the physicist Marcello Cini articulated this position in its full potential through a popular scientific journal called *Sapere*, which they transformed into the avant-garde publication of leftist science. The editorial of the first issue of the new series lays out the epistemological break they sought. The problem is that neocapitalism and the way it organizes scientific research “repeats and projects from factories and laboratories a unified command that broadens itself reaching every space and time of life.”³⁶ Against this system of power that merely reproduces itself, the Movement developed a radical counter-discourse.

Hence the turn to a subjective understanding of science against the supposedly neutral and objective approach, which was in fact the direct result of capital’s command, pushed *Sapere* to give voice to “those who have been excluded from scientific knowledge by bourgeois hegemony.”³⁷ In this we see realized Gramsci’s program of a modern philosophy that understands what is objective as subjectively determined, which is to say that explains any “historical fact, as the historical subjectivity of a social group.”³⁸ Lower social groups could now become part of the production of knowledge not because they are simply assimilated or integrated in a new program of acculturation, but because they are the embodiment of those contradictions and sets of problems that society needs to face. They live in their bodies

“Alle origini dell’ecologia politica in Italia. Il diritto alla salute e all’ambiente nel movimento studentesco,” Fiamma Lussana and Giacomo Marramao, eds., *L’Italia Repubblicana nella crisi degli anni settanta. Culture, nuovi soggetti, identità*, vol. 2, (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2003), 401-431.

³⁶ Editorial, *Sapere* 768 (1974): 3.

³⁷ Editorial, *Sapere*, 3.

³⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (London: ElectBook, 2001), 496.

the malfunctioning of society, the expropriation and exclusion on whose base capital realizes always higher profits.

The new editorial line of *Sapere* demanded attention since it reflected the ambition of “concretely overcoming disciplinary boundaries.”³⁹ It was a collective effort transforming *Sapere* from a typical cultural product of capitalist society, into a critical tool capable of divulging new scientific findings in a unitary fashion, that is to say contextualizing them in the complexity of historically changing human societies. Hence the choice of creating a supplement entitled *Medicina e Potere* (Medicine and Power) which focused on health issue and work. Here the aim was not simply to denounce the illegal and dangerous conditions in the working place, but also to divulge “the initiatives and struggles that, born out of a class vision of health issues, already contained the elements for a generalization and creation of a true counter-power of the lower strata.”⁴⁰

Finally, the range of topics discussed in the first year of the new series cast light on the task that this group of scientists had set for themselves and that echoed the Movement’s expectations. The first issue was dedicated to the study of the catastrophe of the Vajont dike in Friuli-Venezia Giulia (1963) when private interests and miscalculation led to a flood that killed 2,000 people. The study laid out the ground for future research, stating that “from examining these facts it follows that it is not possible to speak about science as a neutral tool, whose bad use is due to incapacity, heedlessness and negligence of some professionals, but rather that scientific theories are elaborated by those who want to use them, directing research towards precise goals.”⁴¹ Deploying this new subjective approach to science, the next issues were

³⁹ Peppino Ortoleva, “Le culture del ’68,” Agosti, Passerini, Tranfaglia, 39.

⁴⁰ Editorial, *Medicina e Potere* supplement of *Sapere*, 1 (1974).

⁴¹ Movimento Studentesco della Facoltà di Scienza dell’Università degli Studi di Milano, “Il Vajont: un seminario del movimento studentesco delle Facoltà di Scienze di Milano,” *Sapere* 768 (1974): 6.

focused on topics such as: the energy crisis, technology and informatics, the environment, the food industry, water, genetics and so on.⁴²

This subjectivist approach to the construction of a unitary field of knowledge is based on a solid class-based criterion. To conduct class struggle in the realm of science meant dealing with knowledge and its production “in terms of liberation against authority,” and of a “revolutionary side” against the “conservatives.”⁴³ Here we notice the use of a common Maoist practice that became popular within the Movement. It consisted in always distinguishing between the two poles of the dialectic, progress and regression, and from this analytical split building a solid criterion conducive to action. This methodology deserves attention especially today, given that our society seems ruled by a supposedly positive rhetoric of pluralism “with its unexamined valorization of the open (freedom) versus its inevitable binary opposition, the closed (totalitarianism).”⁴⁴ The Movement applied the Maoist precepts to daily life, even though the real understanding of the Chinese revolution was not so well settled. Mao Tse-tung had drawn attention to the fact that the materialist dialectic resided in the movement of contradiction, which always knows two sides:

When we speak of understanding each aspect of a
contradiction, we mean understanding what specific
position each aspect occupies, what concrete forms it
assumes in its interdependence and in its contradiction with
its opposite, and what concrete methods are employed in

⁴² The Italian ecological Movement is as a matter of fact an offspring of 1968. See Simone Neri Serneri, “Culture e politiche del movimento,” Lussana and Marramao, 367-399.

⁴³ Ortoleva, “Le culture del ’68,” 53.

⁴⁴ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 32. Or as Slavoj Žižek puts it “multiplication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres to the notion of modernity as such,” *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 186.

the struggle with its opposite, when the two are both interdependent and in contradiction, and also after the interdependence breaks down.⁴⁵

Thus practice had to resort to this dualistic-interdependent vision driven by what became popularized as “the concept of dividing one into two.” Every object of investigation was referred back to its law of opposite, and the subaltern element played the part of the active agent in the movement of contradiction. This immanent analysis and critique through which every phenomenon was scrutinized and divided into two opposite fields of forces in the end granted a secure moral criterion for evaluating a situation. Yet this methodology was never final, but dynamically “proceeded towards further evaluations, further critiques, and divisions [...] towards the often tormenting search for the causes of oppression within the couple, and then the individual.”⁴⁶ As the poet Francesco Leonetti remarked, the employment of Maoist dialectic pressed for a “categorical mobilization of judgment and of behaviors” in light of a profound analysis of the socio-economic totality.⁴⁷

This is also why the subjectivist approach to knowledge in 1968 is for Peppino Ortoleva always characterized by a *syncretic* tendency, more than by an eclectic shuffling of knowledge.⁴⁸ It is an effort to analyze (dividing one into two) and then bringing together and gaining a pragmatic perspective. Thus, as political avant-garde, 1968 defies the usual gesturing towards the new that necessarily and violently

⁴⁵ Mao Tse-tung, “On Contradiction,” *Marxists Internet Archive*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm>

⁴⁶ Ortoleva, “Le culture del ’68,” 54.

⁴⁷ Francesco Leonetti, “Lo stile della distruzione: un rapporto liberato fra pratica di partito rivoluzionario e organizzazione di base,” *Che Fare?* 5 (1969): 101; for a clarification of the Maoist influence on the Movement see Luciano Della Mea, 206-213.

⁴⁸ See also Peppino Ortoleva, *Saggio sui movimenti del 1968 in Europa e in America*, (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1998).

dismisses older forms of knowledge and cultural practices. The effort to understand the interdependence between opposites and then to work out the negation did not imply the simple destruction of bourgeois culture, but rather its evacuation. Analysis, critique, re-composition and action: this is the rhythm of the working class science developed by the Student Movement.

This syncretic tendency bears witness of the complexity of 1968 as a historical fact. It is up to those who think it is important to study it, to comprehend the task of reading “the processes of formation and then of dissolution of a field of knowledge and identities” that appeared to be “at least for a brief period, as consistent and relatively coherent.”⁴⁹ It is probably only through a combination of Pasolini’s critical remarks and the revitalization of the achievements of 1968 that one can begin such an investigation. Both positions can be bridged, especially when it comes to the syncretism of the reorganization of the fields of knowledge and the critique of consumerism and luxury, along with the attempt to build relationships in which things do not take over human life and orient the progress of new social needs. In other words, if the biopolitical transformation of Italian society is studied as a unitary phenomenon, a more solid understanding of its consequences for our contemporary society will certainly emerge.

3.2 A New Subjectivity: Refusal of Work and New Social Needs

If the Italian university was rapidly changing, in the productive field things were also on the move. The enlargement of industrial production in the north called for the employment of an external workforce. Just as in the aftermath of World War I, the composition of labor changed quickly and absorbed former southern peasants who were employed as unskilled workers. These workers had no affiliation with the union

⁴⁹ Ortoleva, “Le culture del ’68,” 47.

or political parties of the left, and were displaced from a kind of semi-feudal oppression in the fields to an equally brutal mechanical discipline in the factory. This laborer became known as the *mass worker*. The mass worker “possessed three decisive attributes: it was massified, it performed simple labor, and it was located at the heart of the immediate process of production.”⁵⁰ It was the mass worker’s spontaneous rebellion, often in opposition to the interests of the previous generation of skilled and politicized workers, that shook the foundations of a system of power where unions played a minor role, as their political platforms suffered from the strong interference of the parties of the left, and their power in the factories was minimized by the slim numbers of members under the granitic command of the industrialists.

In 1962 the spontaneous and unorganized insurrection of Piazza Statuto in Turin and its neighborhoods was led and fought precisely by these unskilled workers who were outraged by the new agreement signed between the unions (UIL and SIDA) and FIAT. Piazza Statuto confirmed the emergence of a new conflict embedded in the working class beyond the control of the leftist organizations. For three days, from July 7 to July 9, a large group of workers who had gathered in front of the headquarters of the UIL, engaged in a furious battle with the Padova Battalion of the State Police. The police charged and indiscriminately arrested numerous protesters.⁵¹ The Communist and Socialist Parties who backed the peaceful strike against FIAT, blamed the police’s conduct as well as the workers’ violent response, arguing it was anti-democratic and regressive. Writing for *L’Unità*, Paolo Spriano censured the revolt led by “uncontrolled and exasperated individuals,” and praised the success of the strike

⁵⁰ Wright, 107.

⁵¹ “I fatti di Torino: una provocazione preordinata,” *L’Unità*, 9 July 1962; see also Michele Costa, “Alla Fiat tre giorni di sciopero compatto” *Avanti!*, 10 July 1962.

warning that “the uproar of speculation and provocation will not erase the real truth: the energy and combativeness of the workers’ consciousness.”⁵²

This unexpected rebellion was instead picked up by few intellectuals who read it as fully integrated in the larger strike against FIAT, rather than the result of the plotting of “professional intriguers.”⁵³ Furthermore, they understood that it was precisely in the rude and spontaneous rebellion of unorganized and unskilled workers that they could find the revolutionary potential that neither the overwhelming power of neocapitalism, nor the stabilizing function of the official left had yet completely neutralized. Even in its most primitive political content, for scholars and militants like Raniero Panzieri, these forms of struggle rapidly evolved from the simple claim for higher wages to the questioning of “the general [*complessivo*] relationship between the working class and capital.” The consequence was thus theoretical and political at the same time. As Panzieri realized, there was a need for “overcoming a fragmented, badly empiricist vision and to take up once again a Marxist vision of reality: so that what is real is not the empirical data – a given factory seen as an atom – but capital, as it reveals itself in a specific situation.”⁵⁴ It was through the magazine *Quaderni Rossi* [Red Notebooks] that Panzieri along with other younger scholars like Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri and Alberto Asor Rosa, the think-thank of what would be known as Italian *operaismo* or workerism, drew from this analysis a different concept of the *class composition*, that is to say the behavioral dimension of the proletariat “determined by the interplay of the technical structure of work, the psychological

⁵² Paolo Spriano, “La sconfitta di Valletta,” *L’Unità*, 9 July 1962.

⁵³ “La canea della destra,” *L’Unità*, 9 July 1962.

⁵⁴ Raniero Panzieri, “Lotte operaie nello sviluppo capitalistico,” *Spontaneità e organizzazione. Gli anni dei «Quaderni Rossi» 1959-1964* (BFS: Pisa, 1994), 76.

pattern of class needs and desires, the institutional environment in which political and social action takes place.”⁵⁵

Thanks to sociological inquiries in the factories *operaismo* re-established the theoretical ground for worker’s *autonomy* from Capital. Workers and capital appeared now as two *alterities*, that is, two antagonists connected by an objective factor: class struggle. Now, after 1963, when the metalworker protests were defeated, Panzieri adopted a more cautious view regarding the actual independence of worker’s subjectivity.⁵⁶ Mario Tronti instead pushed in the opposite direction, codifying “the scandalous novelty of the new workerist ideology: the reversal of primacy between capital and labor.”⁵⁷ According to *operaismo*, labor and class struggle are the motor of social transformation. Capital’s reorganization is simply a synthesis out of which one needs to chisel the past affirmative moment of the oppressed groups. The supremacy of the working class sets in motion a reversal which in a Hegelian fashion shows how the oppressed and marginalized are in fact the holders of a totality. Thus, for Tronti, the modern working class “has only to combat itself in order to destroy capital. It must recognize itself as political power, and negate itself as productive force.”⁵⁸

Here we notice the distinctive difference between the revolution of the Factory Councils and the new one that was in preparation in 1968. The Factory Councils aimed at the re-appropriation of production in order to win the war against misery. As I observed in my reading of Notebook 22, Gramsci also gestures toward a new phase in which the worker would become a collective entity. Tronti and its group stated that this moment had finally arrived, now culminating in the figure of the mass worker.

⁵⁵ Timothy S. Murphy, Glossary, *Books for Burning, Between Civil War and Democracy in the 1970s Italy*, by Antonio Negri, (London: Verso, 2005), xxxii.

⁵⁶ See Nanni Ballestrini and Primo Moroni, *L’orda d’oro 1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), 140.

⁵⁷ Qtd. in Wright, 63. See also Antonio Negri, *Domination and Sabotage. On the Marxist Method of Social Transformation*, now in *Books for Burning*, 232; on worker’s autonomy see also Lumley, 37-38.

⁵⁸ Qtd. in Wright, 84.

“Individually interchangeable but collectively indispensable,” Tronti argued, “the mass worker personified the subsumption of concrete abstract labor characteristic of modern society.”⁵⁹ Once generalized, this condition had direct consequences on the forms of struggle adopted. Collectively, the mass worker already represents the totality of production. In order to fight, the mass worker cannot appropriate work (for there is nothing to appropriate), but rather negate or *refuse to work*. According to Tronti “passivity should be understood as an instance of class antagonism, a form of organization without organization.”⁶⁰ Spontaneous acts of sabotage were even clearer moments of this fight, which had to be extended and understood in its revolutionary potential. So if the 1920 Factory Councils aimed at giving back production to the real producers, now these exploited producers could only block production or refuse to participate in it. All this occurs because “only those who actually produced surplus-value could block its accumulation, and with it the reproduction of the capital relation.”⁶¹ This radical line of thought was extremely influential for 1968, and constituted a common ground for uniting students, workers and women in the following years.⁶²

The refusal to work as the daily practice of indiscipline colonized the factory, the school and also the family. Breaking away from these sacred institutions meant exploring other forms of collective life responding to totally different needs. It is a

⁵⁹ Wright, 107.

⁶⁰ Qtd. in Wright, 77.

⁶¹ Wright, 85.

⁶² This new outburst of political action grew steadily in the sixties becoming a movement that drew energy and a sort of implicit protection from the official left but that largely exceeded it. Similar to the neo-feminist groups, the Movement was distrustful of party politics. Birnbaum, 153-155. Probably only the CGIL was able to absorb part of its output in order to renew itself and gain larger control in the factory. See Lumley, 243-250, 257-267. The cycle of workers' antagonism emerged in the first part of the sixties and then culminated in the hot autumn of 1968. If one looks at what happens before the spring of 1968, it becomes clear how the Movement had undergone a consistent period of incubation and thus was not born overnight as Pasolini believed. It found its grounding within, but also outside the official left which, despite the many confrontations and misunderstanding, Pasolini was still picturing as the only real revolutionary subject. See Diego Giachetti, ed., *Per il Sessantotto: studi e ricerche* (Pistoia: CDP, 1998).

different form of sociality that is generated through this generalized disobedience. Expressing a strong critique against capitalist production, “for the second time in Italian history the issue of workers’ control established out of the Turin industrial monopoly.”⁶³ A modern version of the Factory Councils mushroomed in the Fiat plant spreading throughout the industrial north. Echoing delegate structures of the 1920s, the Factory Councils “was accepted as the new unit of organization in the factory, but on the condition that the union branches and the internal commissions set them up, while continuing to represent workers in their own right.”⁶⁴ The extent to which the Councils were effective in determining a new industrial policy is discussible. In 1972, they gained some accomplishments, but not in terms of recognition of the Factory Councils.⁶⁵ What is noteworthy is instead the new demands that the workers put on the table. For synthesis’ sake, I will explore its political form by considering the example of *Lotta Continua*, a political organization that theorized and practiced the politicization of social needs.⁶⁶

LC represents the perfect political creature to emerge from 1968. It was formed by students and workers and had a significant feminist component. It made its appearance during the so-called “hot autumn” of 1969 in the FIAT shops later to become a journal in the same year. As a political party its story was brief, since it had lasted only seven years when in 1976 it shut itself down after a convulsive national convention. Its charismatic leader was Adriano Sofri who had graduated from Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa with a thesis on *L’Ordine Nuovo* and the Factory Councils. The organization had strong political affiliations in Turin and Rome and then spread

⁶³ Lucio Libertini, *La Fiat negli anni settanta* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 88.

⁶⁴ Lumley, 260.

⁶⁵ See Lumley, 260-261; Libertini, 98-102.

⁶⁶ The other organizations were Unione dei Comunisti Italiani [Italians Communist Union] *Potere Operaio* [Worker’s Power] and the group gathered around the magazine *Il manifesto*.

throughout the peninsula, organizing wide-ranging campaigns to mobilize prisoners, soldiers and urban lower strata.⁶⁷

The pivotal element of the politics of a group like LC was precisely mobilizing “people around the worker’s subjective interests – housing, urban services, and quality of life.”⁶⁸ With the slogan “*riprendiamoci la città*” (Take back the city), LC focused its political work on the social needs of the people. “It was from such campaigns that many of the urban Movements’ greatest successes came; from rent strikes by public housing tenants, to ‘self-reduction’ of municipal utility rates and public transportation fares, to expert and aggressive attempts to change urban general plans.”⁶⁹ LC also promoted proletarian first care services [*ambulatorio rosso*] and the proletarian market [*mercato rosso*] that, opening for the first time in Pisa, were rapidly extended to Rome, Milan and Turin.⁷⁰ The idea behind this strategy was to prepare for the revolution by revolutionizing everyday life. In that way every new social practice, “new material conquest has to be stripped of its capitalist covering and enjoyed, used and lived in a new proletarian way.”⁷¹ Strategically, the program also aimed at “strengthening workers’ unity” in order, as an editorial of the journal *Lotta Continua* advocated, “to attack the price mechanism and break the isolation of the worker outside the factory.”⁷²

Against the critiques of the older generation of leftist militants who believed in the factory as the heart of class struggle, LC, along with other groups like *Potere Operaio* [Worker’s Power] promoted political actions that put the metropolitan space

⁶⁷ On the history of LC see Luigi Bobbio, *Lotta continua: storia di una organizzazione rivoluzionaria* (Roma: Savelli, 1979); Elena Petricola, *I diritti degli esclusi nelle lotte degli anni Settanta: lotta continua* (Roma: Edizioni associate, 2002).

⁶⁸ Tarrow, 279; Corrado Sannucci makes a similar argument in *Lotta continua. Gli uomini dopo* (Arezzo: Limina, 1999).

⁶⁹ Tarrow, 279.

⁷⁰ Petricola, 90.

⁷¹ Luciano Della Mea, 126.

⁷² Qtd. in Petricola, 86.

at the center of the social conflict. The centrality of the factory was in fact rapidly vanishing. Under the pressure of social movements, new forms of life were sprouting that did not accept the subordination to the law of production, its work ethic and its patriarchal concept of the family. The establishment of places of counter-power was the sign of a quick transformation that tended to set up the metropolitan space as “the place of common social cooperation, of the re-composition of society’s fractions.”⁷³ From a spatial point of view, this implied a shift from the centrality of production (the factory) to that of reproduction (i.e. the fabric of society).

Modern social needs had in fact changed greatly from the previous generation. In the 1960s poverty and disfranchisement of the lower strata of society had surely not disappeared, but the standard of living was very different from the immediate post-war years, let alone the social unrest of the two red years. The productive system was now able to sustain its own producers. The problem was not how to produce appropriate quantities, but how to equally distribute the mass of goods. The social inequality of the redistribution of wealth was the real contradiction in Italy’s access to a modern abundant society. In a bizarre twist of history, poverty was now generated by richness, rather than by scarcity. As Franco Piperno keenly pointed out:

1968 represents a sort of exodus from the fear that the regime of the factory brought along with the beginning of modernity. With the private appropriation of agricultural spaces, million of peasants lost their social autonomy and were forced to rely on wage-labor to survive. It was hunger, or the fear of hunger that was the great discipliner

⁷³ Lanfranco Caminiti, Introduction, *Settantasette. La rivoluzione che viene* (Roma: Derive Approdi, 2004), 61.

of human masses. [...] Thus 1968 announced that the fear of hunger – as the collective feeling of the Western World – was on the verge of disappearing. The exemplar form of this announcement was the proposal [...] of a citizenship income, of a life annuity.⁷⁴

A common citizenship income detached from an actual job was one of the proposals that grew out of 1968. As I show in the next chapter, neo-feminist groups also put up a campaign for a wage for house workers. In general, all these claims came from the same intuition: the idea that wage was a *variable* that was *autonomous*, or *independent* from and of production. For the Movement it became clear that the independence of wage with respect to productivity represented the “class political awareness.”⁷⁵ Now that a stronger and more combative alliance between workers, future workers (students) and women was gaining sway in society, the old mechanism of labor servitude (the extraction of plus value) became the target for a multiple attack. If the wage were to be detached from its hourly quantification and made autonomous from the quotas of production, its final amount was going to be subjectively determined through confrontation and negotiation. In other words, instead of resulting from a negotiation based on the relation between time and production it was going to be calculated, in its most favorable cases, through an agreement in which the force of labor dictated its conditions to capital. Furthermore, workers’ requests for higher wages converged progressively towards equal raises independent from different jobs

⁷⁴ ‘68 *L’anno che ritorna* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2008), 19. Althusser recalled Marx distinction between the “quantity of value (wages) necessary for the reproduction of labour power” which “is determined not by the needs of a ‘biological’ Guaranteed Minimum Wage (*Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel Garanti*) alone, but by the needs of a historical minimum.” See “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>>.

⁷⁵ Franco Berardi, “Il partito, l’organizzazione e la classe,” *Che fare?* 4 (1968-1969): 82.

or qualifications within the work process itself. Here we see worker supremacy coming to full maturity, for as the theory of Tronti's workerism discloses: if capital is "set in motion by labor-power... labor is the measure of value because the working class is the condition of capital."⁷⁶

In the cases where salary negotiation was not effective enough, the automatic reduction of the price for commodities or standard services, also called *proletarian expropriation*, became a widespread practice. Inflation rapidly eroded the purchasing power of the working class, so that leftist political organizations collectively practiced expropriations of common commercial items that the very working class was producing and selling but could not afford to buy.⁷⁷ As the attack against wage-labor disclosed the fact that there is no real quantitative fairness in any compensation, it is only a question of levels of power, commodities too, as the product of that unfair exchange, become a contentious territory where what is legal was subjected to a collective decision. Commodities and consumption became the yardstick to measure the strength of the collective, for they showed how the collective could exercise a sort of political power in deciding the allocation of the portion of the wealth produced.

The radical questioning of the objectiveness of wage-labor was precisely one of the key elements that the struggle of the 1960s and 1970s laid out again, gaining a consensus that echoed that of the Councils Movement after World War I. To be sure, the demand for more money, for higher wages and a larger share of the wealth that the country was producing did have some of the consumerist nuances that Pasolini criticized. The increase in the consumption of material goods was part of it, for the new generation was already appealing to many as a new market. The music industry,

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Wright, 84.

⁷⁷ See Lumley, 15. The workers' variant of proletarian expropriation within the realm of production was called "autoriduzione" that is "worker-controlled reduction in output," 189. As we have seen in Chapter 1, this strategy was not new, it was adopted by the Fiat workers during the 1920 factory occupation following the IWW notion of a "go-slow," see Chapter 1, 43.

especially Rock and Roll, started to score great profits, but also the fashion industry changed drastically, becoming a global mass industry thanks to a new market constituted of young buyers. Thus, not surprisingly, when we speak of 1968, music and fashion became the two things the media like to dwell on, followed usually in casual relation by the sexual revolution. A drastic change in social habits: this is what today society of spectacle likes to recall and reinvigorate for the collective memory. It is a distorted and very partial view of course, but it points to an element of truth. This element articulates the very thin line between the empowerment of lower strata of society and the use that capitalism makes of their achievements. For, as Robert Lumley put it, certainly “style took political connotations” and “commitment was worn on the sleeve for all to see,” but their recuperation into the commodity exchange became real as soon as the Movement’s activism decreased in intensity.⁷⁸

The protagonists of 1968 like to emphasize the first and more positive side of the argument. Franco Piperno writes that “it is true that [...] somehow 1968 contributed to the emergence of a new productive system. But it is also true that this system leaves its power relations untouched, in that it maintains, unchanged, the capitalist’s power to arrange the time and labor of others.”⁷⁹ Piperno attributes the ultimate defeat of the Movement to the integration into the system of consumption and the new behaviors and social practices. As I mentioned earlier, Pasolini condemns students for being integrated in a buyer’s culture and for recreating a mass subculture grounded on consumerism. Yet his critique is based on a notion of scarcity that comes out of the exceptional material conditions of the war and post-war years. Pasolini’s counter-system is what he calls the “age of bread” as opposed to the age of abundance.⁸⁰ To be sure, the capitalist system was already producing with great

⁷⁸ Lumley, 71.

⁷⁹ Piperno, 1968, 20.

⁸⁰ *Scritti corsari*, 66.

distortion and injustice the conditions of possibility for a society of abundance. But the real innovative element that 1968 attempted to urge forward was not the return to a previous stage of development, but rather a different use of those means of production that were wrongly solving the problem of scarcity and a different way of consuming, one not based on the exploitation of others and profit-making.⁸¹

Connected to this view on consumption, the Movement rapidly drew linkages with the ways in which power functioned and relied on “the ideology of abundance on which the real lack of capitalist society is founded.”⁸² Power thus was referred back to rarity. The rarer the power, the more unbridgeable and “natural” becomes the difference between those who have and those who don’t.⁸³ The democratization of the decisional centers discovered that the student assembly, along with the immanent and self-reflective focus of every development of 1968 cultural production, synthesized this permanent oppositional practice. Yet in order to carry it out, production also had to be revolutionized.

The aim of the struggle thus shifted. On one side it had to do away with the old productivist solution. On the other, it had to fight “mercantile alienation generated by unrestrained industrial production.”⁸⁴ This is a radical change in terms of social practice because it pushes the objective of the revolt towards a completely different direction. Expropriation and misery generate specific redemption fantasies of the lower strata, so that with their rebellion the subaltern groups pursue shares of power and wealth that they do not have access to. But in an age of abundance, the Movement cannot and will not theorize this kind of reclaiming. Instead of laying claims to what it did not have, the Movement put forward the idea of “experimenting with life forms

⁸¹ See Piperno, 1968, 76.

⁸² Basaglia, “La soluzione finale,” *Che Fare?* 5 (1969): 2.

⁸³ Basaglia, 3.

⁸⁴ Piperno, 1968, 98.

and different kinds of consumption less characterized by the waste of human and natural resources.”⁸⁵ This new typology of consumption is not simply integration into the dynamics of consumer society. It must be connected to the idea of *refusal of work*. The radical negation of work meant in fact the subtracting of time from “the alienation of wage-labor and its subordinated social relations.”⁸⁶ It meant also refusing relations of production characterized by “exploitation” and placed emphasis on social cooperation, on the “unity of social productive labor.”⁸⁷ With its social reproductive practices this new conviviality represented a liberation based on the sharing of affective and social wealth.

This in turn involved a different kind of production and consumption not synchronized to the mechanical rhythms of the Fordist machinery. The extended dimension of non-working time added a peculiar slowness to communal life, as well as a whole set of creative activities which were based on political activities. The reconceptualization of time will become more crucial. By the mid-1970s, when this new sociality was now involving a larger segment of urban life, the line between production and reproduction blurred into communal practices. The refusal of work functioned as a multiplier of new territories of human activities that exceed production; as Lanfranco Caminiti noted, this non-workingness produces a “liberated time as productive force.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Stefano Petrucciani, “Il mancato incontro con la rivoluzione,” *il manifesto*, 10 March 2007; Piperno, 1968, 96. It is true though that the commodification of the mass culture that the Movement produced rapidly turned the latter into a subculture through the allurements of merchandising, branding and so on. “The paradox of counterculture is the exasperation of those aspects of consumerist ideology that were the starting point of its original antagonism,” Mangano and Schina, 103.

⁸⁶ Caminiti, 55.

⁸⁷ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 274.

⁸⁸ Caminiti, 55.

Contesting Power, Songs and the Last Celebration

The various groups that grew out of 1968 did more than practice forms of alternative social consumption. Their conviviality was intensely political and active in contesting the bourgeois display of power, and the typically Italian ideal of the *dolce vita* of the 1960s. A usual case of this form of remonstrance, called “*contestazione*,” implied direct actions aimed at disrupting high class social rituals like opening nights at the prestigious Milanese theatre La Scala.⁸⁹ After the police opened fire on farm laborers in Avola in Sicily, Milan students stormed the La Scala theatre shouting “the farm laborers of Avola hope you enjoy the show,” and threw rotten eggs against the wealthy audience.⁹⁰ Another bloody confrontation took place near Pisa, during New Year’s Eve of 1968, when the well-to-do celebrated the end of the year. As a famous song recalls what happened:

That night in front of La Bussola,
a cold San Silvestro night.
That New Year’s night
we will never forget it.
Gentlemen coming in
their shiny cars
looking spitefully at
workers and students.
They were the same gentlemen
that exploit us all year long,

⁸⁹ On the strategy of the “*contestazione*” and its setbacks see Stefano Bonaga, “Una linea di massa del movimento studentesco,” *Che fare?* 4 (1968-1968): 88-91.

⁹⁰ Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato. Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), 279; see also Mario Capanna, *Formidabili quegli anni* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1994).

those who make us die
in the factories nearby.
They came to have a toast,
after a year of exploitation,
to have a toast to the new year.⁹¹

Organized by *Potere Operaio*, the protest against the display of luxury in an exclusive club, La Bussola in Forcelle, near Viareggio, was smashed by the police, who shot several rounds, injuring a militant, Soriano Ceccanti, who later remained paralyzed. Sang with a fierce and angry pitch, this song performs a true example of oral counter-history that is extremely effective in turning upside down the accounts given by the press and the media in general. Deploying the point of view of the protesters, it supports the construction of a collective narrative in which the oppressed joined forces in a radical critique and de-legitimizes the ruling class who, in order to protect the lavishness of its celebration, did not hesitate to use arms.

This is just one example. *Valle Giulia*, a song performed by Paolo Pietrangeli and Giovanna Marini, became a true counter-account of the battle near the Faculty of Architecture and true popular rival to Pasolini's poem. In the joyous choral refrain "*non siam scappati più!*" [we did not run anymore!], the song turns around Pasolini indictment of students as "bullies," and "blackmailers."⁹²

They [the police] grasped their clubs
and hit us as they always do,

⁹¹ Canzoniere Pisano, "Quella notte davanti alla Bussola," *Quella notte davanti alla Bussola*. Dischi del Sole 69, 1969.

⁹² Paolo Pietrangeli and Giovanna Marini, "Valle Giulia," Rec. March 1968. *Mio caro padrone domani ti sparo*. Dischi del Sole 197/99, 1969; Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 150.

but suddenly something occurred
a new fact, a new fact
a new fact:
we did not run, we did not run anymore!

It is the cry of a multitude of subjects who, in discovering their collective power, a *new fact*, authentically portray themselves as a social entity. The recognition of the “we” stands out not as the boasting of a fistful of bullies, but as the choral expression of counter-power.

The circulation of these songs, which worked as educational tools for the new waves of militants, proved very effective for the Movement. They established a public memory which the Movement could control, shape and spread at a minimal cost with great benefits in terms of identity politics. They became part of the new rituals and social practices that the various political groups were spreading. Especially for the creative, but still engaged moments of aggregation, they performed the double role of entertaining audiences and elaborating foundational moments for the new counter-culture.

These artists usually grouped around songbooks [*canzonieri*] and had their own counter-circuit of concerts and happenings. The *Cantacronache*, for instance, was an organization based in Turin which carried out the groundbreaking archaeological and anthropological work of collecting and preserving of Italian folk and partisan songs. Most of the components of *Cantacronache* were in fact intellectuals such as Italo Calvino, Franco Fortini, Umberto Eco or independent scholars like Paolo Pietrangeli and Ivan della Mea who only later became singers. It was this fertile research that provided for these non-professional musicians a repertoire of rhythms and intonations of popular songs which they readapted and re-created out of the urgency of telling

their own stories.⁹³ From the ashes of *Cantacronache* were born the *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano* in Milan and the *Canzoniere Pisano*. Their political affiliation was also quite clear. After 1968, *Il Canzoniere Pisano* was renamed *Il Canzoniere Proletario* and became the musical branch of LC. The singers that joined it participated in political initiatives, contributing to the renovation of Italian music, precisely by skipping the usual process of selection and control of the record companies.

Music, but also comics, theatre and radio program--the first and most important being Radio Alice in Bologna--creatively addressed and practiced the social issues and aspiration for change incarnated by the Movement. This part of the counter-culture became the most visible element along, of course, with the most superficial aspects of its manifestations, such as fashion. But singers like Ivan Della Mea were first of all militants of the Movement. As artists and singers they contributed to the broadening of its influence, not merely as propagandists, but as real producers of knowledge.⁹⁴ It was a knowledge that tailgated reality, which wanted to have an impact on it. With the circulation of cultural products like songs, these artists can be taken as an example of the new counter-culture militant-laborer.

The difference between propagandists and producers of culture is one that needs to be clarified. It descends directly from the biopolitical changes I have underlined throughout this study. In a society where culture served merely as the reproduction of its own establishment, art appears to be solely a super-structural element. With the term super-structural I do not mean to downplay art's role which in fact remains highly political especially in its propagandist function. Yet in a society

⁹³ See Alessandro Portelli, "Avanti note alla riscossa," *il manifesto*, 5 Febr. 1998; Paolo Pietrangeli, "Zaccagnini - Pietrangeli: in Viaggio tra Musica e Politica," *reinbo.tv*, April 2008, now in <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq3R3z-yYe4&feature=related>>.

⁹⁴ On the inventiveness of the cultural revolution of the Movement see also Pio Baldelli, "Comunicazioni di massa," *Enciclopedia Feltrinelli-Fischer* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1973).

where reproduction becomes progressively the motor of production, artists or producers of culture become laborers in their own right. Because they are involved in that same process of immaterial production that society as a whole is gradually experiencing, they also form an avant-garde within the Movement itself. People like Ivan della Mea or Paolo Pietrangeli were producing and living the conditions of their labor. But as intellectuals who talked to a large, young and proletarian public, they had the freedom and the burden to make art. It was an art that did away with the burden of tradition and the circuit of cultural reproduction that the market imposed and, for a period of time, their songs also remained significantly impermeable to consumerist logic.

Consider another popular song that plays with the slogan and the political goals of the Movement, especially the program of Lotta Continua, *Ma chi ha detto che non c'è?* [Who said it doesn't exist?] by Gianfranco Manfredi. Its success relies in the blending of nostalgic and romantic tones, converting the song into a political call to embrace the revolution. *Ma chi ha detto che non c'è?* is constructed through an anaphoric progression in which this *thing*, the revolution which is never directly named, is read back in the particulars of daily life. First in the sexualization of the female body –as a side note here we must remember that neo-feminism would harshly rebuke the Movement for its many instances of concealed sexism. “It exists in the awakening of the body, in the end of sin, in the warmth of your breast, in the depth of your abdomen.” Then it is predicated on symbols of past violence, “the blazing rifle” of the resistance, or of the present “it exists in the crossbars against the fascists, in the rocks on police jeeps,” and finally in new forms of struggle like the “refusal of work,” the “re-appropriation of commodities,” or the collective celebration “*festa collettiva*.”⁹⁵ I have discussed the relevance of the first two: the refusal of work as an

⁹⁵ Gianfranco Manfredi, “Ma chi ha detto che non c'è?” *Ma non è una malattia*. RCA, 1976.

exodus from the factory and its liberating capacity in terms of non-productive activities and the re-appropriation of goods, as practices aimed at breaking the bond between the wage-labor, production and the satisfaction of social needs.

Celebration deserves close attention. It was a much celebrated moment of the new social practices of 1968. Opposed to the notion of *party* as escape from boredom, celebration implied the “regaining of the wholeness of being, where nothing exceeds or excludes.”⁹⁶ Celebration does not fear waiting, loitering. It does not have a real determined structure, nor does it point to an outside of itself. It is not an escape from alienation. It was meant to be an extended time of collective aggregation that effected an ideal of fusion, which politicized being together more than it did individual relationality. Celebration involved music, debates, drug consumption and an open enjoyment of sexuality. “These festivals and events were expressions of a revolt against the ideology of crisis and the austerity plans propounded by both the government and the Communist Party.”⁹⁷ Unfortunately, this new political dimension will show all its weakness during the *Festa di Parco Lambro* in the summer of 1976 in Milan. Antonio Negri describes the gathering as a “carnival of the poor” which, unlike a normal carnival, “could not settle for rituality exalting and nullifying practices in the exception.”⁹⁸ However, the utopian dream of three days of unrestricted joy and revolution sadly ended up in what was later called the “last celebration” of the Movement.⁹⁹ Lootings, violence and assaults on the stage transformed the place in a battlefield. The very food stalls of the political organizations were assaulted and suffered proletarian expropriations. The organizers retreated chaotically, realizing they

⁹⁶ Piperno, 1968, 97; see also Antonio Negri, *Lenta ginestra: saggio sull'ontologia di Giacomo Leopardi* (Milano: SugarCo, 1987).

⁹⁷ Lumley, 301.

⁹⁸ Antonio Negri, “Quell'intelligente moltitudine,” *Settantasette*, Lanfranco Caminiti, ed., 91.

⁹⁹ See Marisa Rusconi, Introduction, *La Festa del Parco Lambro* (Padova: Mastrogiacomo Editore Images, 1979); Ballestrini and Moroni, 519-523; Crainz, 556-557.

had no control over the new young proletariat they claimed to represent. Immediately after, Marisa Rusconi wrote that “the desire for liberation turned into desperate anger.”¹⁰⁰

It was a sad awakening and Pasolini here seemed to have been more than right. The Movement had not considered that an island of non-capitalist life in the outskirts of Milan was not impermeable to larger and deeply rooted social dynamics. These theories elaborated by the Movement had not fully explained how to protect the germ of non-consumerist consumption from the libidinal attachment that commodities generate. It had not fully explored how the self-regulative mechanisms of the new proletariat would grow spontaneously as a reaction to the impoverishment imposed by the system. This is not to say that the official left was immune from this same social conditioning. With the economic boom, the Gramscian idea of the national popular culture that the PCI assimilated in an a-critical and static way led toward the most ruinous capitulations. As I showed, Pasolini’s analysis of communist Bologna described this contradictory situation: consumerism was the driving force of development.¹⁰¹

The Movement also disingenuously celebrated the liberating power of the body, the force of a new immaterial production that this new generation had helped maturing with its struggles. In his most provocative fashion, Pasolini had again pointed at this dreadful possibility. He saw how the liberalization of sexuality was drifting toward its neutralization. In his obsession with fascism, Pasolini perceived (without fully elaborating it) that the biopolitical wager at stake was high. Power

¹⁰⁰ Marisa Rusconi, “Com’è difficile essere giovani,” *L’Espresso*, 11 July 1976.

¹⁰¹ See Chapter 2, 117-119. For Cesare Luporini the notion of a *hegemonic national popular culture* that would drive society and its cultural consumption collided, on the one hand, with “the actual reduction of the intellectual to executive or specialized technician (organic to the productive process) serving the general interests of capitalism,” on the other, with the “rapid diffusion of a mass subculture induced by capital’s means of communication.” Cesare Luporini, “Gli intellettuali di sinistra e l’ideologia della ricostruzione,” *Ideologie* 8 (1969): 66.

conceded a liberalization of sex that made it become progressively more neutral, almost impolitical in its daily occurring. Once it had lost its taboos, sex began to resemble an object of consumption, leaning toward an utterly impersonal quality just like any other exchange of commodities. What was left untouched, though, were the material prerogatives of oppression based on gender and women's positionality in society. This neutral quality was not negative in itself, but to the extent that it sided with consumerism it lost its revolutionary potential. As Pasolini argued, a revolution had occurred, but it was a revolution without a revolution. Said it in Gramscian terms: a passive revolution.

Closing the Debate: Pasolini's Reasons, the Movement's Discovery and Limits

Recounting the story of 1968 is a difficult task. Compared to the 1920s factory occupations, 1968 has no linear narrative. It has no highlights or turning points that condense the possibility of a general insurrection. There is no climax to which one can build up chronologically like the 1920 Milan national council when the revolution was voted down. To be sure, expectations for a revolutionary event were no less intense than in 1920, but the temporal development of the Movement's struggle shows how 1968 was far less linear and cumulative. This is also, however, the peculiarity of the political configuration of the various movements. The Movement was in fact decentralized, spreading its influence in many sectors of Italian society. Ultimately it was not interested or willing to pursue a unilateral attack on the state or to constitute a unified organism equipped for such a task. The longstanding and oscillating debate on how to organize the Movement never found a viable solution. At times swerving towards the idea of a Leninist Party, at times towards a more fluid blending with

workers' organization, 1968 was never able to establish "a unitary and permanent structure."¹⁰² It crashed before any real solution was carried out.¹⁰³

This is the second reason why parallels with the 1920s are problematic. The 1920s Councils Movement defined itself as a distinct *subject* in competition with others, namely the state, the Industrialists, the Unions and, to a certain extent, the PSI. But the Movement's lack of a solid articulation, its fluid relations between students and workers, and the complexity of a society like 1960 Italy make 1968 the protagonist of "an impossible revolution, a revolutionary movement without revolution."¹⁰⁴ The only parallel one can find with its 1920s historical antecedent is possibly the much less ambitious participation to the election in 1976 under the electoral cartel of *Democrazia Proletaria* (Proletarian Democracy) which turned into a political disaster and led to the dissolution of LC.

The kind of peculiar *flexibility* that the structure of the Movement privileged, or adopted is in part the result also of the kind of society the Movement was trying to overturn. The stabilizing capacity of the capitalist system had progressed immensely from the 1920s as Gramsci had already foreseen in his *Prison Notebooks*. The 1968 revolution was a rupture that happened mostly at the level of reproduction, that is, at a biopolitical level which modern society had in embryo and that, at the same time, was preventing from developing in the direction of the expansion of immaterial capacities. 1968 is neither simply the effect nor the cause of the outstanding development of the biopolitical dimension, that is to say, of the potentialities and the burden of increased

¹⁰² See Mangano and Schina, 93.

¹⁰³ On the criminalization and repression of 1977 see Barbieri Luca, "I giornali a processo: il caso 7 aprile," *Carmillaonline.com*, 16 Aug. 2007, <<http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2007/08/002341.html#002341>>.

¹⁰⁴ Touraine, 353.

degrees of oppression that we now suffer.¹⁰⁵ But in its horizontal and disseminated nature 1968 is truly the experiment that preceded our current society.

A slightly different story is possible if we take up the so-called 1977 Movement and the siege of Bologna. It was a ruinous and mostly defensive struggle by a specific area of the Movement that took roots in Bologna and in the North-East of Italy. Despite the sharing of political practices, militancy and even political cadres, the leaderships of LC, for instance, bluntly refused to acknowledge the 1977 Movement and its connection with 1968. Adriano Sofri, the leader of LC, remembers: “as I was looking at the Movement 1977, I thought that one day I could have proudly told my grandchildren: I was not there.” Guido Viale accentuated even more this position: “1977 was a revolt against what was left over from 1968: politics, workerism, ideology, groups.”¹⁰⁶ LC had closed down only 4 months before. The Bologna experiment, though, deserves a close scrutiny, precisely in that it intensifies the social practices that were born out of 1968. The emergence of the biopolitical element can be traced in an even purer form.

3.3 1977: *Alice and Boccalone*

In the 1970s, even if dominated by a “red shopkeeper” mentality, Bologna looked like an exceptional place swarmed by an unprecedented cultural flourishing.¹⁰⁷ It was one of the centres of the *neo-avanguardia*: Umberto Eco and Angelo Guglielmi taught at the university. Other scholars like Piero Camporesi, Carlo Ginzburg, and Gianni Celati would leave a permanent imprint in the study of Italian literature and

¹⁰⁵ Luc Ferry and Renaut, Alain, *La pensée 68: essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

¹⁰⁶ Qtd. in Cazzullo, 279. The occasion for a new upsurge of students protest was once again a school reform. See Lumley, 295-297.

¹⁰⁷ Enrico Palandri, Claudio Piersanti, Carlo Rovelli, Maurizio Torrealta, eds., *Bologna marzo 1977 ... fatti nostri* (Verona: Bertani Editore, 1977), 11.

history. Others like Roberto Dionigi (1941-1998) in Philosophy were equally important. Between 1970 and 1971, the University of Bologna had also established the first Department of Art, Music and Theatre in Italy. Better known as DAMS, it provided a fertile environment for that re-shuffling of disciplines that the academic institutions were endorsing. Innovative artists like Andrea Pazienza (1956-1988) and writers like Pier Vittorio Tondelli (1955-1991) and Enrico Palandri graduated from DAMS.

Bologna was also the capital of the so called “creative wing” of the Movement, the hybrid metropolis where the twilight of the standard mass worker gave birth to a new proletarian and marginalized figure. Antonio Negri called this figure the “socialized worker” [*operaio sociale*], a figure who devotes his or her time to “the multiplication of socially useful labor dedicated to the free reproduction of proletarian society.”¹⁰⁸ Thus a myriad of political-artistic formations populated the social scene. Here I also want to mention: the neo-dadaist group A/Traverso, the militants of the magazine *Rosso*, the situationists of the group Indiani Metropolitani, and the collective that ran Radio Alice, a benchmark in the self-management of the media that will later be shut down by the police during the March insurrection.¹⁰⁹ The broad political referent for these groups was the *autonomia* and its *operaist* assumptions. These students and young urban proletarians were immersed in its theory and practice. Refusal of work and its ethics, no delegation of power, critique of authoritarianism – all of these key concepts were practiced daily with special emphasis, they were

¹⁰⁸ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 243, 272.

¹⁰⁹ For a description of the various groups see *Atlante dei movimenti culturali contemporanei dell'Emilia-Romagna. 1968-2007* (Bologna: Clueb, 2007). Free radios were “thought to have the potential for making every receiver into a transmitter, thereby replacing the vertical, hierarchical structure and one-way flow of messages with egalitarian organization and horizontal and multiple flows.” Lumley, 304.

reworked in light of the playful and corrosive irony that the Bologna Movement invented and used as a new weapon.

During the police repression of 1977, for instance, the students, acquainted with the trigger-happy Italian police, marched in the streets with a piano carrying a sign that said “Don’t shoot the pianist.” Others dressed up as clowns and improvised street performances built on “mockery and reversal which became the customary language of the Movement and that substituted political idioms with logical paradoxes, rationality with nonsense.”¹¹⁰ University buildings were covered by these slogans, satirical writings and graffiti. One took issue with Luciano Lama (1921-1996), the general secretary of the CGIL, who had been openly contested during a conference in Rome because of his reformism and collusion with the government. The unknown writer mimicked the title of a famous song of the time, *Dite a Laura che l’amo* (1967), a cover of the American original written by Jeff Barry and Ben Raleigh *Tell Laura I Love Her* (1960). The funny pun became: “*dite a Lama che Lamo* (Andreotti)” (Tell Lama I Love Him, signed Andreotti). A witty paronomasia full of political sarcasm, if one admits the poetic license of the misspelling of *L’amo*. Another slogan, a parody of the LC slogan “more money and less work,” became “more work and less money.” It quite realistically described the curve of salaries after the economic miracle.¹¹¹

All these witty imaginative interventions scrubbed off many layers of daily state propaganda about the development and the need for sacrifices that the nation had to make because of the 1970s oil crisis. The corrosiveness of the Movement invested heavily in these practices that cast light on the irrationalities and arbitrariness of the socio-economic transformation. This was a time, moreover, when the PCI was rapidly

¹¹⁰ Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 265. On the creative and carnivalesque nature of the workers’s protests see Lumley, 223-225 and 295-306 for the 1977 Movement.

¹¹¹ For this explosion of creativity see Palandri, Piersanti, Rovelli, Torrealta, 157-208.

moving away from the Movement and any of its hypothesis of social change. Supported by the popular consensus and the strength of the Student's and Workers' Movement, the official left had cashed a series of reforms that fulfilled its social-democratic program and, in the case of abortion, pushed it beyond its leaders personal convictions. In addition to the legalization of abortion, the reforms that became law thanks to popular referendums were: the legalization of divorce, the new chart of workers' rights [*Statuto dei Lavoratori*], the law on *Decreti Delegati* and the reform of the psychiatric system with the closing of the asylums. But this is truly the legal legacy that 1968 left to the future generations and its main contribution to the democratization of the country.¹¹² This series of reforms led the PCI into believing that a political alliance with the Christian Democrats was not just possible, but was in actual fact the only way to avoid a military coup, like the ones that had just occurred in Greece and Chile.¹¹³ We now know, for example, that Henry Kissinger considered the Chilean solution of extreme relevance also for a country like Italy.¹¹⁴ The communist leaderships thus elaborated the famous doctrine of the *compromesso storico* [historical compromise] with the Christian Democrats that would supposedly give the PCI access to the government. Consequently, the discrepancies with the Movement widened as did the isolation and misunderstanding for the latter. In its distancing, the PCI was also taking away from the students and workers the sympathies and benevolent look of the popular support that the party controlled. A solid, ubiquitous shade hovered over the Movement and was reinforced by the media,

¹¹² Notwithstanding, Lumley argues that although winning "tactical victories," the Movement did not succeed in "open[ing] up further education for the working class," 102.

¹¹³ See Salvatore Lupo, *Partito e antipartito: una storia politica della prima Repubblica, 1946-78* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2004), 251. On the accomplishments of 1968 see also Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna. Feminism in Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 88-92.

¹¹⁴ See Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York: New Press, 2003).

by the parties and the state. Bologna embodied this claustrophobic situation and “the most dramatic instance of the breakdown in communication between the Movement and the local institutions.”¹¹⁵ After the Movement was militarily disbanded in the late 1970s, the generational gap escalated, falling into aphasia, the desperation and the heavy drugs that killed many in the 1980s.

At the threshold of this passage, Enrico Palandri wrote *Boccalone*, a book that immediately became a cult for the Movement. *Boccalone* is indeed a generational book, naïve at times, but full of energy and honesty. It captures the transformation of the biopolitical dimension and the kind of subjectivities that this passage gave rise to just before they were stabilized and put under tight control by capital. *Boccalone* represents this junction indirectly. The exploration of this biopolitical threshold is not thematized, which is to say it is not a real content in the narrative. The biopolitical dimension is instead immanent in the writing. It is already *that* writing. With *Boccalone* we have a complex archaeological object that crystallized the rising of the biopolitical force at a particular stage of Italy’s modernization.

The story takes place between May 1977 and March 1978, precisely after the military repression of the Movement with the siege of Bologna, and during the subsequent roundup in the rest of the country.¹¹⁶ Yet the references to these major events are scant. *Boccalone* deals almost exclusively about a love story. More precisely, it is an account written in the first person by Enrico Palandri, alias “big mouth” for his uncontainable verbal fluency. This is openly stated from the beginning and the reader is made aware of the sad conclusion of Boccalone’s love story. In what sense does a sentimental love story relate to a collective, stratifying elaboration of

¹¹⁵ Lumley, 306.

¹¹⁶ Between 1977 and 1979 the leaderships of *autonomia operaia* is arrested, among them Antonio Negri, Alisa Del Re the poet Nanni Balestrini, and Franco Piperno (who adventurously escapes). For reference see Barbieri, “I giornali a processo: il caso 7 aprile,” <<http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2007/11/002447.html#002447>>.

forms of struggle and contestation of capital's control like the one carried on by the creative wing of the Movement? Is this another instance of what Pasolini called the hedonism of this new generation? How political can an unhappy love story be? How political is the verbal swarming a young man who suffers for love?

Notwithstanding its popularity, few literary critics have investigated *Boccalone* in depth. Part of the reason is that it owes too much to the social milieu of Bologna and its time, thus this chronological limit for the book also undercut its theoretical value.¹¹⁷ Its documentary value as well as its spontaneity and directness, certainly do not encourage the Italian literary canon to pay attention to a text that at the most is seen as testimony, or as folklore. On the contrary, I want to make an argument for its theoretical relevance. One of the discoveries that 1968 made and the next waves of generations of militants elaborated is that love is endowed with a highly political dimension. Pasolini embraced his theory on the anthropological mutation of Italians precisely after exploring the changes of their sexuality. This said, I want to investigate the formal representation of this love story as the complex staging of the biopolitical energy of the new subjectivity in relation to the dramatic repression the same subjectivity suffered.

Replacing Gramsci with Alice: a New Figurality

In order to write about *Boccalone*, we need to start from another literary figure, the little protagonist of the most famous oeuvre written by Lewis Carroll: *Alice in Wonderland*. It is not in the scope of this essay to provide an exhaustive analysis of the relevance of this figure for the Movement. One could map a wide circulation of the figure of Alice, the latter making its first appearance in the counter-culture milieu probably with the anti-Vietnam war song *Alice's Restaurant Massacree* (1967), later

¹¹⁷ See Enrico Minardi, *Palandri e la generazione* (Ravenna: Longo) [Forthcoming].

adapted in a movie by its composer Arlo Guthrie, who co-authored with Arthur Penn *Alice's Restaurant* (1969). After that, Alice migrated to other films such as *Alice in the Cities* (1973) by Wim Wenders, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) by Martin Scorsese, and finally reached Bologna, in February of 1976, when a group of young militants of the Movement established a Radio station called Radio Alice.¹¹⁸

Alice in place of Gramsci? For the Movement it seemed that Alice provided something that the father of Italian communism could not provide. On the back cover of *Alice Disambientata*, Celati parodies the famous exchange between the queen and Alice on the croquet ground. He writes: "What's with these people who put Alice in place of Gramsci? Off with their head!" Referring to the leftist intelligentsia and particularly to the leadership of the PCI, Celati condenses in this witty parody many things at once. The PCI represents the law, and its violence, but it is also the custodian of a bulk of knowledge and power that used the figure Gramsci as a secular icon. As I hope to have shown, this is not the Gramsci discussed here, rather is the Gramsci domesticated by the guidelines of the reconstruction era period. To be sure, though, coming in the wake of Alice was a repertoire of notions and historical insights that made her absolutely crucial politically.

So in the fall of 1976, a group of students assisted by Gianni Celati gathered around the Alice/DAMS collective and held a one year-long seminar discussing *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Enrico Palandri took part as well. The documents that grew out of this work would be later collected in a book titled *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza* (1978) [Displaced Alice. Collective Materials on Alice for a Survival Manual]. From a narrative point of view, it is easy to notice how Alice becomes the starting point for *Boccalone*. The parallel between the two characters runs as follows: just as "Alice is born in the age of steel, of

¹¹⁸ See Bifo and Gomma, *Alice è il diavolo. Storia di una radio sovversiva* (Milano: Shake, 2007).

machinery and mechanism, of the great development of industrial automation” and her wanderings are the ambiguous attempt to slip out of this mechanical oppression, *Boccalone* represents the intense desire of the new movement to break way from the Fordist cage.¹¹⁹

In the first chapter, I spoke of the role of figurality in Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis. To a certain extent, 1968 readdresses this notion and the related one of translatability. In Gramsci, figurality is developed through a gap; there is a residue of emptiness that allows the movement of translation. The act of translation is precisely this very human and social determination of a relationship between two events such as the Russian Soviets and the Turin Factory Councils. In short, this comparability needs to be established and then organically developed. It is always a conscious historical act.

The new figurality that arises after 1968 is not a transplant, but rather an already-always-present mechanism. Examining the paintings of Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze has said that in his work figures as the “material,” and “the body” ignites a process called “becoming-Animal.”¹²⁰ It is precisely this process of “becoming-Animal” that defines *figurality*. The latter is not representative. It does not double up into content, nor is it an illustration of the process. The movement of the figural is not a “figuration,” for “it must have nothing of the represented object.”¹²¹ It is instead a progression, not a progress, a tension that rhythmically and elastically moves and traverses the environment. *Figure* is the closest adherence to the environment, just like the life of an animal that moves confidently in its element.

¹¹⁹ Alice/DAMS, *Alice disambientata: materiali collettivi (su Alice) per un manuale di sopravvivenza* (Milano: L’erba voglio, 1978), 121.

¹²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 19.

¹²¹ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 35.

Alice makes the case for such Figure, or *figuralità* as I called with relation to Gramsci. The Alice/DAMS group defined figuralità in these terms linking the immanent movement of “becoming animal” to a collective-subjective moment. This figuralità does not imply in fact a leap into the post-subjective dimension, since it still frames this transformation through social, collective agency. The movement of this new figuralità follows the rhythms of something expected that is profoundly desired and awaited, but which knows no final synthesis; rather it constantly changes into a “figure of a non-congruence [*non coincidenza*].”¹²²

After the first joint: waiting-figure-falling-happening – i.e. the automatism of the response to desire – how can this positivity go forward? This is to say, what happens after the satisfaction made you fall down in the event, in the situation or into the longed-for adventure? [...] How do you raise the positive intensity of the adventure when confronted with the fears and perils of a standstill or of a fall into the drama? The second mechanism we call the figure of non-congruence.¹²³

The fall here refers to Alice’s descent into the rabbit-hole and her consequent wanderings. Falling, wandering and being displaced in space and time [*disambientare*] are the lines of development the new subjectivity is searching for and experiencing. This willed disorientation articulates a different idea of social change, one that has no modeling capacity, but rather is fully immanent to its own movement of wondering. “No, I am not looking for a program or a menu” says Negri, “a menu is still a menu,

¹²² Alice/DAMS, 82.

¹²³ Alice/DAMS, 81-82.

and until proofs to the contrary appear, the ones who end up eating best are still the bosses.”¹²⁴ Desire is thus paramount, for “there is no happening without the craving for something to happen, without the joy of following the trace of a figure.”¹²⁵ This is the subjective moment. But once the awaited event occurs, one needs to avoid any blockage or fixation of the desiring élan which could potentially freeze its intensity into a representative element. One needs to follow the paths of figurality, an errant loafing, a constant slippage that does not cling to a final solution: “the figure is the trace one follows when slipping into an event.”¹²⁶

In this the movement of the figural, one the Alice/DAMS group defined as a “figural tale,” resembles the pattern of a dream.¹²⁷ The comparison is appropriate. As poet Bob Perelman writes in the poem *Here* “it is well known that there are no final surfaces in dreams.”¹²⁸ The amniotic dimension of dreams is all-comprising: while it happens, there is no real outside of dreaming. Gregory Bateson pointed out that dreams are articulated through metaphors whose “relata remain unmentioned,” for the “patterns of dreams are timeless” so that there is “no framing of action” nor any “metacommunicative frame.”¹²⁹ In dreaming, since “the pattern is the thing,” there is no real doubling, no illustrative content. The immediate coextension between subject and its element is ubiquitous.¹³⁰ We come back here to Deleuze’s concept of “becoming-Animal,” which *Alice disambientata* reads precisely as the “absolute

¹²⁴ *Domination and Sabotage*, 260.

¹²⁵ Alice/DAMS, 77.

¹²⁶ Alice/DAMS, 76.

¹²⁷ Alice/DAMS, 77.

¹²⁸ Bob Perelman, *Face Value* (New York: Roof, 1988), 90.

¹²⁹ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990), 421.

¹³⁰ Bateson, 421. This is also why “nightmare is perhaps a psychic dynamism that could be sustained neither awake *nor even in dreams*, but only in profound sleep, in a dreamless sleep,” Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 118.

movement of displacement,” [*disambientazione assoluta*] and “deterritorialization” that Alice undergoes in her wanderings.¹³¹

If Gramsci translated the figurality of the Factory Councils into the architectonic goal of building “a representative apparatus that has all the hallmarks of a State,” the 1977 Movement was emphasizing instead circulation, nomadic errands, and transitory moments, flights from anything that seemed stable, heavy and foundational.¹³² We are now in a position to follow Palandri’s figural tale so as to measure the political relevance of his book.

Boccalone: a Love Story

Waiting-figure-falling-happening: the rhythm of figurality agitates Palandri’s pages from its opening. This is how the book begins: “Every night I leave my little house in the centre of the city whistling a joyful song to the beautiful May moon. [...] Days go by, I know I can loaf around.”¹³³ Immediately after, a trace emerges. This figure takes up the form of a young girl:

Anna wears white overalls and a red jacket, not always of course, only at times. I fell in love with her eyes very early, almost immediately. If it will ever happen to you to see a person with hands reddened by the cold, a thin impolite voice, and to remain in raptures for a while looking at the way she moves, who she talks to, [...] that person will get

¹³¹ Alice/DAMS, 69. The group draws this concept from Deleuze and Guattari ground breaking *Anti-Œdipus* (1972).

¹³² Gramsci, “The Factory Council,” *Selection from Political Writings* (New York: International Publisher, 2003), 366.

¹³³ Enrico Palandri, *Boccalone. Storia vera piena di bugie* (Milano: Bompiani, 1997), 7.

under your skin instantaneously and it will be awfully
difficult to forget her. [...]
So this beautiful May made me happy and lost me to Anna
whom I saw moving around from a distance, whom I spied
in her courting and hoped to kiss.¹³⁴

There is nothing particularly exceptional about Boccalone's falling in love. Even the act of admiring from a distance the love object falls into the normal range of love literature, at least from the middle age courtly love tradition of Chretien de Troyes (1135 ? – 1190 ?). But it is not the distance in itself that is crucial here; separation and sublimation are not the fuel of the desiring machine. In these opening lines one reads instead how it is the trailing of a figure that inspires action. Separateness is not willed. It is rather just the starting point. This distance is progressively reduced with the drawing near of Anna and the savoring of her traits as well as her ways of being. It is the following of this image that becomes a process of familiarization and learning for Boccalone.

This pursuing seems open-ended. Boccalone seeks no "consolatory reconciliation," nor some kind of "personal or collective originality."¹³⁵ Anna is the content of desire, but her figural nature prohibits stoppage and implies a loosening of the subject and a surrendering to the mere action of adhering to that figure. The effect is a powerful reshuffling of the order of things.

The enormous energy of sex that is capable of not letting
you fall asleep forever escapes the norms that we give

¹³⁴ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 7.

¹³⁵ Vincenzo Binetti, *Città nomadi. Esodo ed autonomia nella metropoli contemporanea* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2008), 69.

ourselves, winter norms we need in order to face the misery and fears of solitude. [...] In spring, organized orgies become cops and allow us to feign a concreteness of desire where instead lies only an abstract scheme that separates words and things in zones dealing separately with sex, intelligence, love ... “divide et impera!”¹³⁶

The disciplined space of neocapitalist modernity rules over social reality, marking it as a sort of chessboard that connects elements through a rigid compartmentalization of life: things that can be done and not, and things that are not allowed but can happen in a localized zone of transgression. The couplet “organized orgies,” for instance, is a perfect oxymoron Palandri employs to capture the nature of modern society. This mechanization of sexuality blocks any redemptive power because it constructs and channels desire into a locality which serves in the end to reinstate power. So orgies are forbidden and oppose morals, but once organized and assembled as the moment of transgression, they become useful outlets of potent subterranean impulses.

It is the famous Julius Caesar’s dictum “divide and conquer!” updated through the modern division of labor that extends its range of action to the whole of social life. Against this sectorialization of the social in separated realms, the Student Movement had operated a syncretic turn. In Palandri’s book, it is the very nickname of Boccalone, the protagonist, literally big mouth, that furnishes the model for the overcoming of limitations and reductions of the intensities of desire and their multiplication into a social wholeness which is emotional and linguistic. Boccalone confesses that “my mouth is large and leaks continuously.”¹³⁷ This is how the new

¹³⁶ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 11.

¹³⁷ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 23.

way of dwelling in a space takes place: as an overflowing or encroachment of emotions [*traboccamento*].

Overflowing takes place instead when the zones in which you defined yourself are completely emptied out. When categories vanish like air. When, while talking, you realize that you can affirm every single thing and its contrary and even other things that have nothing to do with it.¹³⁸

Every time that Palandri uses expressions that deal with a geometrically closed space desire suffers a blockage. Constraints, discipline and fix determinations must be rendered fluid. The *spatialization* of desire freezes its metamorphic power, whereas its opposite, the *temporalization* of desire represents the molecular structure of figurality. Hence the heightening of excess over containment, overflowing over delimitations and most importantly a powerful affirmation of multiple elements of life over a clear-cut distinction and categorization. Vincenzo Binetti rightly pointed out that, in *Boccalone*, we are dealing with “nomadic situations” in which “deterritorialization” destabilizes “urban space rigid borders” and give rise to “rhizomatic processes” generating horizontal and non-hierarchical relations.¹³⁹

From a literary point of view, the temporalization that figurality fosters defines a distinctive style of writing. Going beyond the momentary linguistic break that Palandri’s style introduced into the cultural scenario especially for young writers, temporalization, in rendering fluid writing, underscores a specific use of the present tense. At times Palandri collapses the story into the present which is disconcerting for

¹³⁸ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 11-12.

¹³⁹ Binetti, 67, 68.

the reader who does not really know what happened before and what happened after. Enrico Minardi has keenly suggested that we are confronting a sort of long shot that although it is cut by chapters, unfolds following a choral continuum.¹⁴⁰ This is precisely the point. What I call the presentness of Palandri's grammar does not obviously mean a coagulation of the narrative into a blocked present. Present here means an immanent inhering in life and one that follows the pattern of figurality: Boccalone desires Anna even before knowing her. Linearity and development are dissolved in the temporalization of figurality. As in one of several meta-narrative moments of the story, Boccalone remarks:

I must break the grammatical chain that binds the first person to the past tense. In this way it resembles the tale of an old man that looks at his past from a point of synthesis, who rearranges memories only in order to control them.¹⁴¹

It is becoming and change that make resonate the present, and not its symbolization. Narrative needs to vibrate along the chords of this non-symbolic movement. I want to emphasize that this stylistic choice is functional within the larger argument I made for the new kind of figurality that emerges out of the Movement. This anti-literary stance is not the sign of a mere literary innovation. It is not even a customary avant-garde position. The Movement despised such a modernist stance, since an artistic innovation detached from its popular milieu ultimately reflected the reinstatement of separateness and autonomy of art through a process of aesthetization of life.¹⁴² 1968 fought such a perspective with all its might and 1977 endorsed such a postulate. It was instead

¹⁴⁰ Enrico Minardi, *Palandri e la generazione*.

¹⁴¹ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 15.

¹⁴² Alice/DAMS, 146, Enrico Minardi makes a similar argument, *Palandri e la generazione*.

thanks to the full usage of a new fluid relationality that a secularized art could be dissolved into a multiple and self-generating communication. Boccalone's narration thus is like a

Light hum, a tale that does not concern anybody and simultaneously that talks about everybody. [...] I believe this is a collective object. But the collective does not belong anymore to the project, it is part of my dreams, my way of passing time, living life, being in deep shit and trying to get out of it.¹⁴³

Beginning with the subheading of the book *A True Story Full of Lies*, Boccalone's language constantly foregrounds contradictions. This tale does not address anyone in particular but rather is collective, Boccalone says. Throughout the book this series of contradictions is reflected mostly in the spoken dimension. For instance when Boccalone says things like Anna and I "did not talk much. I would speak many words, she didn't. Both of us didn't talk much," one may be tempted to think of the difference between the words and speaking; for if the talking involves some resolution, some meaningful talking out of a problem, or even worse, *talking somebody around* some issue, Boccalone is certainly more prone to speaking understood as the dispersed flux of words and sentences.¹⁴⁴ Yet the unreliability of this narrator has something iconic in the way it unfolds. Boccalone does not heighten the artificiality of language or representation and is not interested in the theatricality of the love act. The dream-like

¹⁴³ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 134.

¹⁴⁴ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 9. Somewhere else Boccalone says "I am not particularly sincere, not at all, but I always say everything. Lying lies in the construction of a sentence, non in its content. Long story short, I never say yes or no, but always something else," 23.

dimension of desire knows no outside; everything is already simultaneously artificial and true because it is contained within the same sphere of intensity. Within this kind of figurality, desiring is “a vast coiled skin, where slits are not entries, wounds, gashes, openings, but the same surface following its course,” and here contradictions are merely a rippling of the skin.¹⁴⁵

As I have emphasized, the articulation of the figurality of desire is not a voluntaristic act of the subject. It is instead connected to the set of conditions that consumer culture created. The commodification and control of every domain of social life produced a landscape of “devastated cultures.”¹⁴⁶ The metaphor Palandri uses is one recalling Allen Ginsberg’s famous poem *A Supermarket in California*. Boccalone says:

Imagine a supermarket of words, with pieces of books one read, brands of cigarettes, overheard sentences, all that flows in the guise of words and sentences. So what one says is truly a commodity: I love you, and he puts in the cart a box of washing machine detergent. I live, should I buy cocoa? I want a pair of sneakers, blue herons crossing the sky... Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. Everybody obviously lives in the supermarket in their own way. There are those who steal and those of pay, and those who don’t care because they are not interested in consumer society.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 21.

¹⁴⁶ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 42.

¹⁴⁷ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 43.

This reality made of ruins and fragments is the secularized reality of neocapitalism Pasolini pointed out. As Palandri would later make clear, this devastated landscape generates a sub-culture in which knowledge is compartmentalized and divided into aggregates “that are disconnected from a world view that is coherent and expressive [*articolata*].”¹⁴⁸ To beat back this fragmentation, to break compartmentalization through a re-appropriation of social space was the revolutionary goal of the Movement. The LC campaign to “take back the city” was one of such attempts, even though its goal of establishing alternative communist structures smelled already too much like a foundational practice. Especially in Bologna, the 1977 Movement mixed forms of re-appropriation with a politics of flight and exodus. The organization of any kind of political structure was based on a politics of exodus and the emptying out of institutional power. It is the same form of figurality that prescribes a politics of flight and displacement.¹⁴⁹ The expanded dimension of time liberated from work demands a new sociality that cannot be frozen in institutional practices. There are institutions everywhere; militants in Bologna lived in an environment that thought highly of itself because of the cooperatives and the various self-managed organizations that the left was able to build over time. So the Movement took what it had to take from it with a sort of vampiric joyfulness. As Negri argued: “On the terrain of reproduction, the most immediate form taken by the refusal of work is that of the direct appropriation of wealth, either on the commercial level or on the institutional level.”¹⁵⁰

Next to the emptying of places of power, stands a new economy based not only on proletarian re-appropriation, i.e. stealing, but also on a practice of gifts giving. This exuberant description captures the nature of this new political economy:

¹⁴⁸ Palandri, Afterword, *Boccalone*, 149.

¹⁴⁹ See Binetti, 70-71.

¹⁵⁰ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 274.

My desiring machine is not synchronized with the labor machine [...] my synchronization is incontrollable, my complementarity, my falling in love, all I do and live through is beyond the law. I wait for you even when you will not come [...] I will invent myself [...] in a language that still belongs to us which is not that of exchange. Desire knows nothing about exchange; desire knows only theft and gift. Ten felonies per day, my love, and we'll be ours!¹⁵¹

It is a different form of circulation of objects and libidinal contents, one that opposes legislation of spaces and time which are in fact arbitrary and the result of a fixed power structure. This is a new form of conviviality based on theft and gift. If the former is clear in its reference to proletarian expropriation, what does the gift entail? The Alice/DAMS group dedicated some time to the investigation of the notion of the gift. The gift is a tale, just like the book *Alice in Wonderland* was a gift for a real Alice that Lewis Carroll knew. A gift can be the giving back of something that is not yours, “your inquietude passes through me and I give it back to you in the form of a tale, where your inquietude rises to a positive movement.”¹⁵² This is a pendular movement which takes in order to pass something around. It goes back and forwards in an endless circulation, thus recapitulating in itself the dynamics of figurality. Here we can appreciate the re-articulation of the theory of workers’ autonomy on the terrain of reproduction. Once the quantitative relations of wage-labor break loose, what is left is the efficacy of the act of power. The new constituent subject can decide and put into

¹⁵¹ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 40.

¹⁵² Alice/DAMS, 141.

practice another form of sociality that “defines its own laws and practices on the military occupied terrain of the bourgeois.”¹⁵³

Furthermore, the desiring machinery represents an attempt to turn over a world reduced to objects, and elevate their mechanical capacity to a revolutionary potential. How close we are here to Gramsci’s figure of the medieval copyist. Given the new context of a society of abundance, in which the Taylorization of production has slipped out from the factory, the processes of abstraction of labor are now at work in the biopolitical dimension of the social. In the 1988 afterword, Palandri sums up this stance by saying that this presentness and immanence of desire gestures towards a “fluent anonymity” signaling the “intention of living on the planet anonymously, just like plants and things.”¹⁵⁴ It is the impersonality with which life encompasses itself as the flow of the undistinguished. As it is, it is neither linear nor progressive; it knows intensities, rippling, crests and sudden vacuums. In its impersonal vital quality, it represents *life* that, rising to a new potentiality, regulates itself and expands.

Boccalone’s love story is a book born out the formation of this new biopolitical dimension. It registers the biopolitical transformation of increased levels of vitality, of an increasingly more powerful potentiality of the human. The unruliness and the unwillingness to fixate this new potentiality into an act of power, or the institution of a new law represent the platform that the Movement adopted. Not a very Gramscian perspective, if I may add, but certainly one that equates, as Piperno says, social “life forms” to “biological forms.” Just as any organism is “autonomous to the extent that the production of desire coincides with the process needed to satisfy it;” the autonomy

¹⁵³ Moroni and Ballestrini, 436.

¹⁵⁴ Palandri, Afterword, *Boccalone*, 151.

and the constituent power that Boccalone's community of feelings represents points toward this remarkable interpretation of the social as a non-essentialist natural.¹⁵⁵

The Persistence of a Gloomy Ending

Although Boccalone's recollection defies linearity, there is still a narrative to be accounted for. From the beginning we know that this love story will not end well. The presentness of Boccalone's language that incorporates present, past and future constantly reminds the reader that this will be a sad love story. The disturbing effect it produces is that the joyous and exuberant description of the falling in love with Anna and the various travels and wanderings of the two is paired with the knowledge of a gloomy ending. Yet this narrative device does not reestablish any form of teleological linearity in the story. The reader is not following a series of admonitions or hints to reconstruct the final synthesis. Love and pain are present simultaneously. Palandri does an excellent job here in exposing the precariousness that a love story entails. From the start love expresses the possibility of its end, so that the latter persists as a shade throughout the relationship without defining its meaning. Palandri's rendering of this temporal twist through the idea of an organic presentness of past and present, where beginning and ending blend, is a convincing way of expressing the unprotected nature of love. Love's fragility and contingency is assumed as an immanent, self-determining force. It is the explosion of life with all its dangers. This is a quality that definitely snatches the work away from an all too easy labeling of *Boccalone* as the instant book of the Bologna Movement.

Enrico Minardi argues that there is a tension between the healing effect of writing, which is always individual, and the meta-literary inflection of the novel.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Franco Piperno, "La parabola del '77: dal «lavoro astratto» al «general intellect»," *Settantasette*, Caminiti, ed., 101.

¹⁵⁶ Enrico Minardi, *Palandri e la generazione*.

Thus, in the end, Boccalone therapeutically works to cure the wounding that love may produce. Yet I detect a broader significance for this linguistic therapy. The story in fact also works out the collective and personal trauma of the military repression of March 1977. There are few instances in which this event is recalled, but one cannot help noticing how in such cases the individual dimension is directly linked to the collective one, especially given the political nature of desire that I have explored so far. Historical intrusions pop up at topical moments. A recollection of one of the common direct actions or happenings in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna salutes the birth of Boccalone's love. Here it is in the usual colloquial language (i.e. full of anacolutha)

We were building air balloon with Giuliano, then we would
fly them high above singing songs. One afternoon I was
coming out one of these weird things that I don't know
how to call, where we would make work whatever we had,
jumping like nuts, screaming "fly! fly!!" or "burn!! burn!!"
I was very happy, in that state of love overflowing
[traboccamento] which spring produces.¹⁵⁷

Boccalone cannot find names for these creative practices that were indeed political to the extent that they represented "the total utilization of wealth in the service of collective freedom."¹⁵⁸ The collective and the personal here are indistinguishable because they coalesce in the political dimension of desire. "Piazzas are the power plants of desire" Boccalone says early in the novel.¹⁵⁹ But when he proposes marriage to Anna and she does not answer, the episode is associated with the killing by the

¹⁵⁷ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 11.

¹⁵⁸ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 270.

¹⁵⁹ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 20.

police of a young militant of LC, Francesco Lorusso, shot down in via Mascarella during the March riots. Boccalone comments “I am under the impression that since March the political project that the state has in mind for us is... destruction.”¹⁶⁰

A similar link between the individual and the collective is established with the pun *political prisoner* and *love prisoner*. Escaping for a vacation, Boccalone needs to face Anna’s family, and the repressive law of the state. Anna is under age, and so she cannot go abroad with him. In a comic autobiographical moment of recognition, the protagonist confronts family authority and pleads guilty for his subversive activity: “my name is Enrico Palandri. I belong... to her, who you don’t even know who she is. I declare myself a political prisoner!”¹⁶¹ This declaration would become sadly common in the years to come and will characterize the dismantling and imprisonment of the structure of the Red Brigades who had chosen the shortcut of armed struggle. But here Boccalone pleads guilty to the excessive nature of his desire, which appears illegal and subversive when confronting authority.

Finally, after the end of the relationship with Anna, Boccalone begins another long journey, this time full of desperation, but equally disorienting as his falling in love with her. In a small town in Liguria, Boccalone thus ends up spending New Year’s Eve by himself in the old paternal home. He lights a fire thinking that “1977 ended without a celebration” or a *festa* as the Movement called it. The collective desire has been ripped apart and confined, imprisoned just like Boccalone seeks refuge in the family dwelling alone as if in a vain return to a spatialized moment of peace. But there is no restoration of stability, let alone a past one like the return to the family origins or the authenticity of the past; nor does the ending of Boccalone’s wanderings seem to be representable. The closure of the story is consumed in a continuous deferral

¹⁶⁰ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 89.

¹⁶¹ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 56.

of its natural course. The temptations of synthetically grasping the love relationship into one scene, into a definite conclusion are always defied. Perhaps the persistence of this narration has a meaning that goes beyond the mere individual difficulty of accepting the end of a relationship. It is the inextricable bundle between love story and collective emotionality that fuels the narration.

The narrator thus mobilizes a series of devices to avoid a closure. He cites the ending of Woody Allen's movie *Annie Hall* (1977), where after the final re-encounter between the protagonists, the tension dissolves without implying the continuation of their relationship. Yet, this potential conclusion is contradicted by another literary model, that of the *Carmen* (1845) by Prosper Mérimée with the killing of the beloved. The latter is also dismissed. It would represent the worst possible ending, one that contradicts the movement of figurality and of the politicized nature of desire. A seeking that destroys its object would annihilate any fruitful oscillation between theft and gift. So Boccalone continues, admitting that "there is no end then. It all started in May, but before that there was April, it beautiful too. So it all ends in March while telling the last happenings, and recording them in the confusing murmuring of these pages."¹⁶²

But the intensity of desire cannot stop even here. Next comes Bob Dylan's song *Mama you have been on my mind* (1964). As on other occasions in the book, the lyrics are inserted in the narration and are part of a true soundtrack of the book, an innovative practice this that will inspire other writers like Pier Vittorio Tondelli. A gift from a friend who taught Boccalone how to play it, the song seems to gesture towards the acceptance of a future where this relationship is finally over. The final lines picture the beloved in front of the mirror while the lover wonders: "I'd just be curious to

¹⁶² Palandri, *Boccalone*, 137.

know if you can see yourself as clear. As someone who has had you on his mind.”¹⁶³ However, in this final act of cognition, the lover is actually imposing his view on the beloved. It is he who owns the narrative of their relationship. It is he who has captured with his act of love the essence of the beloved, and hence his superiority in the gaze. Not surprisingly this ending is disrupted once again by other meetings with Anna, and more suffering. The story is over, but the narrator continues in his narration, deferring a resolution.

It is the journey of my disorientation [*spaesamento*] of
writing and of my autonomy. I believe it was good for me.
Maybe not, perhaps it was better to cry more. However this
is also one of the things that happened in this last period.¹⁶⁴

The pedagogical, curative nature of literature is once again negated, though not its disorienting and swarming reproduction. The real conclusion of the book is a series of writings on the walls that Anna had supposedly written: “shit,” “Enrico Big Mouth,” her initials and “I love you.” It is graffiti on the wall, an utterly public and hedonistic communication. But as an inscription it represents the point of juncture between something completely individual, and an external, impersonal trace. Those words will be on the walls for a long time, but nobody will really own them, nor would anybody who reads them resolve their meaning in their individual contingent act of reading. The same happens with the slogans and satirical writings on the walls of Bologna: they embody an affirmation that will not be fixated in a monumental ornament. Its transitory form will not be ruled. Neither the state nor the media will command their

¹⁶³ Bob Dylan, “Mama you have been on my mind,” Rec. 6 Sept. 1964. *The Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3*. Sony, 1991.

¹⁶⁴ Palandri, *Boccalone*, 140.

meaning. It is only up to the defeated, if they will be able and willing to exert it, to own the narration of their story. Just as Boccalone feels down and wounded by the crashing of love, the Movement will quickly kneel to the military repression of the state. But the songs, the books, the radio programs and the voices of those who survived keep that story moving.

The Fixation of the Sexual as Male Objectivization

As a coda to my reading of *Boccalone*, I want to conclude briefly by discussing the link between Boccalone's private love story and its biopolitical dimension insofar as it regards sexuality. It will serve as a bridge to the neo-feminist theories that will heighten the political element of the act of love that I will explore in the next chapter. In *Boccalone*, the understanding of the functioning of the love act as a biopolitical movement registers the transformation in the potentiality of the body of the new subjectivity. Once again I make reference to the Alice/DAMS group to support the theoretical import of Boccalone's wonderings. I already highlighted the parallel that the group establishes between Victorian society and its closed mechanical form of production, and the reality of neocapitalism. The same perspective holds for sexuality. Working on the studies by Steven Marcus *The Other Victorian* (1966) and Ronald Pearsall *The Worm in the Bud* (1969), the group underscored the collusion between a restrictive moral on sexuality and the possibility for the male to transgress it. The impressive number of prostitutes that England registered in the Victorian period is the result of the displacement and expropriation of the lower strata from their peasant life. But the creation of whole neighborhoods where sex was sold to the upper class points also to a social imaginary that progressively rotated around "fantasies of infinite

power that Victorian society articulates through its great steel buildings, its faith in progress and reforms.”¹⁶⁵

Against this dominating phallogentric ideology of love and sexual relationship, the new generation attempts to articulate a liberating set of practices. The critique they carry out against phallogentrism aims at displacing the fixating of sexuality on the sheer genital elements with a circulatory movement that translates “the erotic investment from pubis to the eyes.” Here we encounter a “fantasy that tries out a circulatory investment through images.” In short, it is an intensity that does not coalesce “on fixating mechanisms,” but that grows “on minimal short-circuits in progression.”¹⁶⁶

Now, it is true that the very expression “falling in love” indicates a “fall” in which one tends to lose his or her identity. As the Alice/DAMS argued, in the falling in love the quest regards a hypothesis, “values that we are hunting or we are awaiting to appear (but do you love me?)”¹⁶⁷ The Movement strongly criticized any genital objectivization of desire and the figure of Alice represents the prototype of this dynamic. The pursuing-wandering of Alice is the seeking not of “a-sexual figure, but of a pre-sexual one. That is to say a figure that comes before the preestablished sexual investments that necessarily led to penetration and coitus.”¹⁶⁸ If it is reasonable to see the act of falling in love as an open-ended movement, one that is hypothetical and not apodictic, it is harder, though, to overlook its dualistic exclusive relationship. To be sure these texts go beyond a mere libertine ideology that fosters a simple de-regulation of the sexual field. As I mentioned, the critique of transgression as the reinstatement of a solid phallogentric (and Victorian) symbolism is clearly laid out by the Alice/DAMS

¹⁶⁵ Alice/DAMS, 105.

¹⁶⁶ Alice/DAMS, 111.

¹⁶⁷ Alice/DAMS, 115.

¹⁶⁸ Alice/DAMS, 118.

group. Furthermore, even if the libidinal element is central in the story, in *Boccalone* there is not any form of aesthetization of sexuality, nor is there of possession or manipulation. Apart from the cumbersome hint at *Carmen*, sexuality is always represented as extremely vital and joyful flux.

Yet, *Boccalone* stages a male protagonist as the seeker. Anna is mostly an impalpable, unreachable figure, one that, as Binetti argues, resembles Ludovico Ariosto's fugitive but ever present female figures.¹⁶⁹ To what extent does the liquid figure of Anna safeguard the danger of a fixation on the beloved? Is it thanks to her incorporeal nature as a subject? Are we predicating the defeat of a male symbolic objectivization on the base of the weakness of the female subject? Flight is certainly one of the strategies to avoid objectivization. Women practiced it, and the Movement embraced it. But there is more to it. A feminist group that participated in the Alice/DAMS seminar warned against the positivity of this representation of the female figure. They disputed the violence of the "projection on the others of our own images." To which the group responded that "women too fall in love" and that this violence discloses a "margin of non-lawfulness that can never be re-absorbed in a contract between two persons."¹⁷⁰

This is an interesting move. Equality is predicated on the basis of a natural act of love-violence which falls outside the iniquity of society. In other terms, by removing this act from the social relationships of a given society in which gender relations are well defined and patrolled, and by projecting it on a natural-changeless dimension, love is reconciled in the acceptance of what happens daily. Now *women do love*, that is a fact, but how and what is the context for their love? This will be the question of neo-feminism that I assess in the next chapter. For now I want to stress the

¹⁶⁹ Binetti, 68.

¹⁷⁰ Alice/DAMS, 144.

answer these texts give to the question of sexuality. Sexuality is flexibility and circulation; it is the mechanism that eschews a reduction to the order of things. This is true for the majority of 1968. But here we are still in a progressive phase of the emergence of a new subjectivity. The biopolitical dimension is heightened by the agency of this subjectivity and its constituent force, because it is still an area of affirmative struggle to which capitalism has to find forms of negotiations and profitable ways of incorporation. When capitalism finds a way to put to work those very impulses and free forms of sociality, the biopolitical itself will take up a more ambiguous form.

CHAPTER 4

THE PERSONAL IS (BIO)POLITICAL! A STUDY OF ITALIAN MARXIST
NEOFEMINISM

Going beyond any historical judgment of what capitalism has represented, its continuing existence today means barbarism, not only because it represents the theft of non-wage work from women – who are obliged to live in isolation, semi-dependent on men – but also because it is the theft of non-waged work from the man. Women are forced to work for capital through the individuals they *love*. Women's love is in the end the confirmation of both men's and their own negation as individuals.

(L. Fortunati, *The Arcane of Production*)

4.1 A Genealogy of Italian Marxist Feminist Thought

During the “two red years” and the Councils’ struggle, the avant-garde of the worker’s movement responded to a specific situation that I have called the age of material scarcity. This movement had an advantage since the know-how and the capacity to produce was still largely in the hands of the producers. The *ordinovista* goal was to collect, improve and progressively liberate it from the oppressive character that marked capitalist society. At the same time, workers understood that this objective had to be practiced daily through a political organization that would lead to a new form of collective life. Here labor-power would have eventually developed into a more human and richer dimension, where every activity had a social and collective goal, i.e. where production was rationally tailored on the needs of the masses. But as we saw the society of the time still lacked the material base (and the political strength) to dismantle class privileges and change the necessity of labor into freedom.

With the defeat of the movement, what Gramsci called “the passive revolution” slowly produced the conditions with which to solve the problem of scarcity, preserving though a system of oppression. After World War II, with the *reconstruction* and the economic boom, the Italian industrial structures were rebuilt and modernized and standards of living improved. As Gramsci had foreseen, it was a conservative revolution for it preserved and even perfected the domination of one class over the others. Thus exploitative relations and coercion remained the motor of development, but the progressive decline of the incidence of scarcity changed the face of poverty. For lower classes the problem was not the predatory command that provoked malnutrition or unhealthy conditions (although pockets of real misery still persisted in Italy), nor was it just poverty as shortage of goods, but that of the satisfaction of more advanced social needs like education, voluptuary goods, proper living.

The shifting from a period of scarcity to an epoch of abundance, or post-scarcity also changed the terms of the political dispute, so that the new stabilization of life necessarily provoked new forms of antagonism. Moreover, the role and the strategy of the official left that survived the fascist dictatorship and that became the protagonist of the war of resistance were largely determined by the geopolitical situation of the cold war. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) lead by Palmiro Togliatti was in no position to lead a revolution; strategically, military and even politically this was never really an option for the party. Class struggle continued in ambiguous ways within the limits of parliamentary democracy. For the party and its militants it became a long march toward a revolutionary future built on a series of advanced democratic reforms. The PCI was indeed substantially different from the party that Gramsci had led during the advent of fascism. The PCI was organized as an anti-fascist inter-class alliance, whereas the PCd'I, built after the split from the Socialist Party in 1921, was a class party, which relied on *class cleavage* as the real political novelty that would correct the PSI failure to lead the revolutionary struggle.¹

Togliatti was adroit in avoiding a disastrous military confrontation. He reinforced the base of the party and its consensus on vast sectors of the Italian society, but during the years of the *reconstruction*, the project of the Italian way to Communism invested heavily on two points that ultimately contradicted legitimate aspirations of its Leninist base. They are both crucial for my genealogy of Italian neo-feminism and they are clearly stated in this document that communist members of the National Liberation Committee (CLN) posted on the walls of the FIAT plants, shortly after the same workers had defended them from the Nazis' ruinous retreat.

¹ See Costanzo Preve, "Da Antonio Gramsci a Piero Fassino," part 5, "Palmiro Togliatti e le scelte strategiche del periodo 1943-1948," *Kelebek*, <<http://www.kelebekler.com/occ/prevefassino.htm>>.

The clandestine period and sabotage... are over. I think it is important to remember the courageous efforts of everyone, from the director to the very last one of us; however we need to work and stick to the instructions of our bosses who have their share of responsibilities in production. They will not obviously rule as despots, rather they will give their necessary input, maintaining discipline with equity and good sense... We trust the work of those who have been appointed... Let us remember that bosses are necessary. We all have a house, a family and if paternal authority, that sometimes asserts itself with a deserved slapping, would fail then the family would wreck.²

The Fiat Soviet of the fall of 1920 seems to have sunk into oblivion. The statement bluntly lays out the party line concerning the public (production) and the private sphere (household). This insistence on work ethic and the need to make sacrifices represents the spirit of the reconstruction period and the years of the economic boom. The PCI strongly supported the dogma of productivity and discipline, believing that the backwardness of the country could have been defeated only through economic (and social) development. Thus the party's policy was directed toward the protection and advancement of disciplined and skilled workers who were instead rapidly

² Qtd. in Leopoldina Fortunati, "La famiglia: verso la ricostruzione," *Brutto ciao. Direzioni di marcia delle donne negli ultimi 30 anni* (Roma: Edizioni delle donne, 1976), 73. Until 1952, four high esteemed members of the PCI serve as directors with the approval of the Agnelli family. One of them was Battista Santhià who took part in the April occupation in 1920 and was later fired by FIAT. See Piero Montagna, Introduction, *Con Gramsci all'Ordine Nuovo*, by Battista Santhià, (Roma: Editore Riuniti, 1956), 8-9.

disappearing because of the new automation of production.³ Not realizing that Italy was indeed on the forefront in the application of certain mechanisms of advanced industrialism, the PCI dove into the ideologization of the inner virtuousness of a supposedly union friendly system of production.

Closely linked to the relations of production one finds the acceptance and insistence on the moral life of the family. As the call to authority in the factory and in the family shows, the party generally embraced a conformist and Puritanical moral on domestic issues.⁴ The average communist militant thus developed a “curious sexual and family” mentality, fighting “for more human relations within an almost unchanged family” structure.⁵ Notwithstanding Gramsci’s early effort to elaborate the link between production and sexuality, the PCI never really went much further, settling for the expansion of female work and more advance networks of healthcare and social services.

Even if Togliatti maintained that “the emancipation of women [wa]s tied to that of the workers,” directing women toward the same coercive system represented

³ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, *L’orda d’oro 1968-1977. La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), 18; this is how Francesca Pieroni Bortolotti summarizes PCI political line during the reconstruction: Palmiro Togliatti “left aside Marx’s and Engels’ considerations (the family that destroys, dissolves itself, that must be subverted theoretically and practically, the increase of male and feminine polygamy etc.) for the same reason that he left aside *State and Revolution*, Lenin had talked about the end of the state after the foundation of the Soviet state.” See *Socialismo e questione femminile in Italia 1892-1922* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1976), 15; also Romano Luperini argues that with the reconstruction “the communist and socialist parties” rendered the “working class the main collaborator to the capitalist development of our country.” See “Gli intellettuali di sinistra e l’ideologia della ricostruzione,” *Ideologie*, 8 (1969): 69.

⁴ The electoral competition with the Catholic center played a crucial role too, for the communist leadership in the attempt to conquer larger shares of the catholic vote censured any libertarian viewpoint on sexuality. On the PCI Puritanism see Diego Giacchetti, *Nessuno ci può giudicare* (Roma: Deriveapprodi, 2005), 165-166; Sandro Bellassai, *La morale comunista. Pubblico e privato nella rappresentazione del PCI (1947-1956)* (Roma: Carocci, 2000); Anna Tonelli, *Politica e amore. Storia dell’educazione ai sentimenti nell’Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2004); Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato. Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003), 503.

⁵ Biancamaria Frabotta, “Femminismo e lotta di classe in Italia.” Franca Bimbi, ed., *Dentro lo specchio. Lavoro domestico, riproduzione del ruolo e autonomia domestica* (Milano: Mazzotta Editore, 1977), 219.

only a partial answer for two reasons.⁶ First, it ignored the specific struggle between the sexes (including those in a proletarian family), and secondly, it disregarded the fact that the proletarian subjectivity as a whole was suffering from the intensification of the rhythm of production of the passive revolution. If the entrance into the factory life offered a new (public) ground for social struggle that housewives never had, it also condemned them to carry a double burden: the fierce routine of factory exploitation and the tediousness of domestic work.

The two key points of the party politics (the relationships production/labor-force and man/woman) belong to the Gramscian problem of the formation of subjectivities. But what was missing in the PCI analysis is properly the Gramscian definition of the philosophy of praxis, that theoretical understanding of the conditions of possibility of the subordinated subjectivity that leads to a social transformation. The PCI was in fact paralyzed by the cycles of struggles of the hot autumn of 1968. Theoretically, the party's strategy was to achieve social change through work, industrialization, and eventually its socialization, practically instead, it was through "formal politics, where accommodation with other social groups was a prerequisite for participation."⁷ Meanwhile the class struggle that served to mitigate capitalist production reinforced the objectivity of the forms of production. Worker's subjectivity became derivative, with class struggle a mere reactive concept.

We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist
development first, and workers second. This is a mistake.
And now we have to turn the problem on its head,

⁶ Palmiro Togliatti, *Problemi dell'emancipazione della donna* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1955), 10.

⁷ Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto Press: London, 2002), 8; Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

reverse the polarity, and start from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned.⁸

This distinct emphasis on the centrality and autonomy of subordinated subjectivities will re-emerge only at the margins of the PCI. As we saw in chapter 3, it will be carried out by a few intellectuals belonging to the left of the PSI, those constituting the *operaista* circle, and by a Marxist component of the *neo-feminist* movement, *Lotta Femminista* which will develop this perspective with regard to women's subjectivity.⁹ In this chapter I will address the results of this radical movement, starting from the analysis of sex and economic relations disciplining female subjectivity. I will use as a literary example Adele Cambria's work on the women of the Gramsci family, *Amore come Rivoluzione* (henceforward Love as Revolution) and then move to a more cogent analysis of the female condition developed by *Lotta Femminista*.

The statement "the personal is political," which is the general working principle of neo-feminism, and that *Lotta Femminista* will theorize in a particular innovative way, summarizes the complex system of unequal distribution of power that constitutes the hidden ground of female subordination. It is within the private sphere

⁸ Mario Tronti, "Lenin in England," *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/it/tronti.htm>>.

⁹ The new post-war movement is commonly called neo-feminism or "second wave feminism" to distinguish it with the original feminism emerging at the turn of the eighteenth Century. See Biancamaria Frabotta, "Femminismo e lotta di classe in Italia"; Giachetti, 11; Franco Restaino and Adriana Cravero, *Le filosofie femministe* (Torino: Paravia, 1999), 49-81.

of domesticity that capital exercises a deep, albeit indirect control, over the social exchanges among individuals. Reproduction thus emerges as the hidden object whose control influences and causes contradictory movements, unexpected concessions as much as drastic discriminations. Disclosing the genealogy of this process of expropriations also helped feminist scholars to outline the stages of women's submission and spaces for a future liberation. As I show this terrain is properly biopolitical, since the regulations of sexuality/reproduction are measures governing life *qua* the general capacity to work (labor-power). Hence the pun of the chapter's title: the personal is biopolitical.

Before we move into this new understanding of the biopolitical terrain of control that neo-feminists brought to the foreground, it is useful to briefly recapitulate the general reflection on women's status as it was articulated by the Italian official left, specifically within the historical context faced by Gramsci and the new born Communist Party. It will give us a larger theoretical breath and allow the reader to appreciate the innovations that the movement will produce in a mutated context – i.e. the passage from an age of scarcity to an age of abundance.¹⁰

Towards a Politicization of the Impolitical

As any other patriarchal society, Italy was characterized by the plunging of female subjectivity into the realm of nature. The pre-historical defeat of matrilineal forms of kinship, together with their relative economic and political forms of power, determined “the supremacy of men over woman” as a “natural principle.”¹¹ In a

¹⁰ In this, my reading departs radically from Donald Mayer's seminal work in the history of women's movements which fixates its Italian side to a peculiar unchangeable identity: “the context for Italian women's condition was an emphatically Italian one, saturated with the Italian past and riven with all the tensions and dilemmas of Italy's painful course in modern times,” *Sex and Power. The Rise of Women in America, Russia, Sweden, and Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 632.

¹¹ Restaino and Cavarero, 113. I use the term matrilineality because recent studies have criticized a supposedly original form of matriarchy and the scientific data that Engels used. These feminist scholars argued that matriarchy as freedom and decisional power over the most important actions of the group

patriarchal society women are imprisoned in the private dimension of the house, while men dwell in the open space of public life. The private is the locus of passivity; the public that of activity. Men are the motor of history, politics...in short of social development. Women are generally excluded from it. Only briefly are they allowed to peek out and play an ancillary role in society. Their relegation to the *impolitical* is the reason for their approximation to nature; their de-subjectification coincides with their burial into nature.¹²

This notion of the impolitical domain of femininity resembles Roberto Esposito's idea of life as a dimension that is not invested by the binary representation of modern politics characterized by one-sided valorizations: us (good) vs. them (bad), democracy vs. totalitarianism.¹³ But the sphere of women's de-subjectification resembles only formally what Esposito proposes as a critique to modernity. It might appear that what lacks here is modernity with, as the patriarchal myth likes us to imagine, the feminine standing as an uncontaminated oasis of the *facticity* of life. And women's real of reproduction is indeed a reservoir, but one which is tightly connected to capital (and modern politics) in a much direct and consequential way than what it seems.

never really existed. See Donata Lodi and Diana Perrone, "Matriarcato," *Lessico politico delle donne: teorie del femminismo* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002), 163-168. But independently from the historical data and interpretations that Engels used, "the significant point for women's status is that the household was communal and the division of labor between the sexes reciprocal; the economy did not involve the dependence of the wife and children on the husband." Eleanor B. Leacock, Introduction, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, by Frederick Engels, (New York: International Publishers, 2001), 33.

Some other Italian feminists believe that the origin of patriarchal society resides in the temporary exclusion of women from production during maternity, yet here too there are studies that show how certain society incorporate temporary exclusion of men through fake menstruation without changing the social hierarchy. See Marcella Gramaglia, "Il marxismo e la donna," *Femminismo e lotta di classe*, Biancamaria Frabotta, ed., (Roma: Savelli Editore, 1973), 207; Leacock, 4.

¹² Adele Cambria, *In principio era Marx* (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1978), 42-44, 46; Restaino and Cravero, 116-117. Their negation as subjects makes them also receptacles of the male projections of intricate series of pulsions: they are animal-like (passional and irrational), they are disposable objects, but naturally unruly.

¹³ See Roberto Esposito, *Categorie dell'impolitico* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1999).

To be sure female de-subjectification pre-exists capitalism, but within the latter a whole new set of contradictions come to the surface. The most obvious and persistent one is the oscillation between the promise of formal equality and its reiterated disappointment. There is no linear progression, no real planned advancement in this march towards democratic rights, such as the right to sell yourself as labor-force on the market. Capital simply requires at times higher degrees of liberalization of the female workforce, and at other times stricter control. Only the result of the cycles of struggle decrees the amplitude of the freedom that women were able to steal from capital's transformations. In this sense, the politicization of the impolitical proved to be a fundamental, preliminary step towards this goal.

As it appears from women employment rates, the path from restrictive to liberal policies was not linear. At the turn of the eighteenth Century, notwithstanding an authoritarian form of monarchic government, Italy had one of the highest figures for the employment of women in Europe. It was drastically reduced by the end of the nineteenth Century when heavy industry took hold, and then skyrocketed again during the labor shortage of World War I.¹⁴ Without a specific analysis of the structural reasons for these changes, i.e. without the understanding of capital's expropriation of women's work as producers and reproducers, the generic claims for equality are constantly in danger of being neutralized by the backlashes of patriarchal beliefs or shelved by the need to solve more pressing matters.

The PSI is a good example of these inadequacies. The party's leadership condemned feminism as a bourgeois deviation, but never really developed a knowledge of the function and position of women in a capitalist society. As a result,

¹⁴ Camilla Ravera, *La donna italiana dal primo al secondo Risorgimento* (Roma: Ecs, 1951) 65-66; see Luciana Capezzuoli and Grazia Cappabianca, *Storia dell'emancipazione femminile* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1964), 51; Alessandra De Perini, "Alcune ipotesi sul rapporto tra le donne e le organizzazioni storiche del movimento operaio," *Dentro lo specchio*, Franca Bimbi, ed., 236-238.

despite the efforts of eminent politicians and intelligent woman leaders, the party suffered the resurgence of traditionalism and sexism.¹⁵ The party inherited Engels' proposition that "modern family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the wife."¹⁶ Hence, against the traditional bourgeois family of the time, the party supported a kind of "free union" (*unione libera*) that was tolerant and flexible.¹⁷ Unfortunately, in a situation of quasi dependency on man, this only meant a higher degree of precariousness, and thus emotional proneness to the male companion. The party however trusted that the revolution, as a transcendent event, would inevitably crumble capitalism and, at that point, women would be liberated with the rest of exploited groups. Not surprisingly efforts to pass laws ensuring woman democratic rights were very discontinuous.

Take for instance what took place in 1917 in Turin. During World War I, women replaced men in the factory, working under the strict military discipline, and simultaneously taking care of domestic work. When the wait to purchase bread was so long that they could not buy it before starting their early morning shifts, they stormed bakeries and refused to enter the factories, demanding food and immediate peace. Barricades were erected everywhere in Turin, and the army intervened causing a bloodbath.¹⁸ The PSI was afraid of this disordered reaction and thus they cooperated to normalize the situation. Even a leader of the Turin woman branch of the party, Maria Giudice (1880-1953), who firmly opposed the war, could not help proposing a solution that was "certainly more human, but still hinged on the division of roles: men

¹⁵ See Frabotta, "Femminismo e lotta di classe in Italia," 211.

¹⁶ Engels, 137, 223.

¹⁷ Michi Staderini, "Sessualità e marxismo i limiti storici della famiglia borghese," *Effe*, 8 (1975): 16; Margherita Sarfatti an occasional contributor to the socialist magazine *La difesa delle lavoratrici* was discarding the battle to legalize divorce since it was useless, socialists only needed "free love," Franca Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti politici in Italia 1919-1926* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978), 43.

¹⁸ See Teresa Noce, *Rivoluzionaria professionale* (Milano: La Pietra, 1974), 20-27; Camilla Ravera, *Diario di trent'anni* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973), 18-22.

shall come back from the front to return to the factory; women from the factory shall return home.”¹⁹

Sexism blurred positions independently from political affiliations and it coalesced around a series of traditionalist religious dogmas, economic rationales, and positivist assumptions. The exclusion of women from work was, for instance, supported by reformist and maximalist socialists on the account of “the diversity of natural duties.”²⁰ Some thought that women’s physical inferiority made them unsuitable for work, while others honestly believed it was civilly to spare them from the harshness of a job. More pragmatically, most socialists justified their opposition to women’s right to vote on the account that they were viscerally conservative. Replying to a questionnaire submitted by the feminist organization *Unione Femminile*, the famous socialist criminologist, Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) asserted that he would give the right to vote only “where, for culture and costumes, women could be considered almost equal to men, not where they looked apparently inferior because of men’s own fault. In this case, he glosses, they fall under the fatal influence of priests. For that matter, woman will always vote conservative.”²¹ Despite their consistent activism and participation in strikes, this prejudice remained a veritable mantra within the official left and, to a certain extent, was also inherited by the PCI. Few escaped the circularity of the argument: on the basis of a future progress, basic democratic rights were denied in the present. The emancipation of women would paradoxically be obtained through their *temporary* disfranchisement.

¹⁹ Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 33. Also Anna Kuliscioff (1853 or 1857- 1925), probably the most influential feminist since the eighteenth Century suffragette movement, “would not connect this battle to the battle for peace,” and this even if in her long career she was always consistent in “directing parliamentary initiatives toward suffragette objectives. Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 39.

²⁰ Pieroni Bortolotti, *Socialismo*, 8.

²¹ Qtd. in Mariachiara Fugazza and Silvia Cassamagnaghi, *Dossier Italia 1946: le donne al voto* (Milano, 2006), 2; even Socialist Reformist Filippo Turati who supported the right to vote for women was convinced that in the short run it would hurt their electoral outcome. See Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 78.

Women suffered even more violent attacks when the post-war crisis reached its peak and unemployment skyrocketed. Mail carriers, factory workers (about 200,000) and bus drivers who had replaced male workforce during the war were the first to come under the fire of the anti-women discourse and the physical violence of the new-born fascist squadrons claiming work for veterans.²² These episodes did not trouble public opinion much. The common sense that never stopped seeing women working outside the home as (at best) an emergency measure, and the legitimating force of an official announcement of the government ordering the firing of 4,000 women from public offices annulled any jolt of egalitarian principles.²³ From the typical right wing traditionalist to the middle class shopkeeper, from the socialist gentlemen to the jobless veteran, an old male alliance was resumed against women, namely against a new sector of the work-force that was becoming a potential competitor. The argument that unemployment was due to women's work was pure misogyny, but its sexist base was solid. As the saying went "ladies worked to buy silk stockings," veterans instead remained unemployed.²⁴ Only few men were really immune from this discourse, and since the PSI and the unions' prime concern was the defense of male jobs, they collaborated with the government in replacing female work-force, swapping work for a special compensation.²⁵

The paradox is that the socialists had committed themselves to women's emancipation very early on. By 1910, the XI Socialist Congress passed unanimously a serious and well-organized motion that Anna Kuliscioff redacted, regarding the

²² Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 20-21 and *Socialismo*, 129.

²³ Qtd. in Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 111.

²⁴ Nadia Spano and Fiamma Camarlinghi, *La questione femminile nella politica del P.C.I* (Roma: Edizione donne e politica, 1972), 25.

²⁵ Spano and Camarlinghi, 26; see also Camilla Ravera, *Breve storia del femminismo in Italia* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978) 102. This inequality was monolithic. A uncompromising Teresa Noce tells in fact the story of the special compensation as a victory of her Fiat colleagues; as she recalls: "Surely we could not lay claim to occupy men's jobs [...] it was right that they would take back their occupations upon returning from the war front, but it was likewise right for us not to be thrown in the street overnight," 32.

relations between the sexes, the double burden of women's work and the undervaluation of their work under capitalist rule. For the first time, the socialist motion argued strongly in favor of concrete universal suffrage that would include women, and so recognized the community of intents and political interests that united proletarian men and women.²⁶ By 1919, the right to vote for women made it to the third position in the PSI political agenda and the party also proposed a law to legalize divorce.²⁷ But notwithstanding a transversal agreement and the parliamentary strength of the PSI, the senate rejected the so called "Martini and Gasparotto law." Later, the new political crisis that led to the election of the following November put an end to the possibility of women voting. The incapacity in taking any significant step toward basic democratic freedoms that many other bourgeois governments had already taken reveals the layering of anti-woman sentiments that pervaded Italian society. It also reveals the weakness of the Socialist Party and the merely propagandistic role that this issued had for its political strategy.

Anna Kuliscioff, writing in the party magazine *Critica Sociale*, said that "the day in which women were pressed into the circle of productive and industrial labor [...] that day they had also acquired their political rights."²⁸ The reality instead was that the patriarchal order in Italy was a solid system of power so that not only women's employment could change drastically in a matter of a few years, but also the gains in terms of social power that they slowly acquired as producers could be swept away by simple prejudice or economic crises.

²⁶ See Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 81-84.

²⁷ With the French Revolution the dispute over the intellectual and moral equality sustained by feminism becomes practical, and the battle for the right to vote represents the primary goal for women. In Italy, it was repeatedly disregarded even if it was assessed from the birth of the Italian state. See Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 13, 43-50; the PSI, for instance, had already tried to extend the right to vote to women in 1912, when the government extended for the first time the right to all men who could read and write that were at least 21 years old or had complied with the military draft.

²⁸ Qtd. in Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 57.

These visceral forms of discrimination were so strong because they were also reverberations of deeper economic mechanisms directed at governing women's processes of socialization. Recently unified, economically weak and notoriously inclined toward the outermost exploitation, the Italian bourgeoisie needed to milk as much as they could from their work-force. No concessions were allowed. Women were economically profitable when they worked: they were underpaid and always the first workers the union or the party would trade off. They were even more profitable when pushed outside production, one pay check (the male worker's) would provide for the whole family, while any attempt to change this situation was erased by the denial of their basic political rights. Sexism was thus the outer skin and the ideological glue that allowed a weak system to survive on, to generate those profits that production was still not able to create.²⁹ It was the vast and obscure domain of reproduction that was fueling economic growth. The impolitical dimension of domesticity (housecleaning, emotional relationships, child bearing) represented the widest margin of profit that a weak capitalism could exploit while it could rely on an interclass alliance, owners and workers united together, based on gender.

The PSI was complacent with this system of exploitation for two reasons. First, its abstract scheme of revolution did not compute worker's subjectivity as an explosive factor, let alone the capacity of a sector of the class (women) to produce a revolutionary change; secondly it was caught in the same partiality of analysis that made its leadership privilege one sector of the working class over the rest of the proletarian class. Its leadership followed the same logic it would later apply to the much detested idea of "proletarian freedom" that Gramsci proposed with the Councils. Political power for recently immigrated non-organized workers, among whom women

²⁹ The church played a vital role in this sense, see Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 119-123; Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 62-75.

who had been employed and were now kicked out: this notion went beyond the party's political horizon. No wonder the party lacked a real political will to push the parliament to approve a law on women's suffrage. The senators considered the topic just another problem that would be solved once the revolution they conjured up in their inflammatory speeches would come. Domesticity remained the realm of the impolitical, buried in an unchanging repetition of natural facts like death or birth. The contradictions it generated were negotiated among males, producing a divergence between ideal statements and practice that repeatedly disappointed women's aspirations.

Loyal to the principle of radical democracy and to the idea of revolution also as a "moral revolution," the young socialists of the *L'Ordine Nuovo* were instead aware that the discriminations against women had to be fought vigorously.³⁰ A number of young women joined the group, and later held important charges in the Communist Party – among them we can recall Camilla Ravera (1889-1988), Teresa Noce (1900-1980), Rita Montagnana (1875-1979) and her sister Elena, Felicita Ferrero (1899-1984). Together they were rigorously moral in their lives and political activity, censuring the costumes of the older socialist generation, among whom heavy drinking and the frequentation of brothels were widespread.³¹ Thanks to the new perspective that *L'Ordine nuovo* was developing, they were also in a better position to analyze the situation of women's oppression. Although they were influenced by a certain degree of familism, they could avoid the paternalist relapses of the socialist leadership and, at

³⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Pre-Prison Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31.

³¹ See Mario Montagnana *Ricordi di un operaio torinese* (Roma: Edizioni Rinascita, 1949) on the Puritanism of the new generation see also Giorgio Bocca, *Palmiro Togliatti* (Roma: Laterza, 1973); Daniela Pasti, *I comunisti e l'amore* (Roma: Espresso, 1979), 50-51. *L'Ordine Nuovo* gives emphasis to the decision taken by the Industrial Workers of the World to declare ineligible for two years any union member who was seen drunk in public. *L'Ordine Nuovo* 12 (1919): 94 [now in Milano: Feltrinelli reprint 1966].

the same time, respond to *some* egalitarian claims of the bourgeois Italian feminist/suffragist movement.³²

The first contributions by the *L'Ordine Nuovo* to the analysis of women's condition started immediately after the group elaborated its own autonomous political line with the discovery of the Italian soviets in the factories of Turin. The first article published in January of 1920 was a rather canonical piece against the commodification of love within the bourgeois family written by Zino Zini (1868-1937), a philosopher and militant of the PSI. But in the following issue, *L'Ordine Nuovo* translated Lenin's *The Emancipation of Women*.³³ Lenin praised the advances of Soviet Russia with regards to the position of women, giving examples of the concrete ideas that communist society had transformed into laws. He argued that, in only one year of power, the Soviet Union had "actually razed to the ground the infamous laws placing women in a position of inequality, restricting divorce... denying recognition to children born out of wedlock... laws numerous survivals of which, to the shame of the bourgeois and of capitalism, are to be found in all civilized countries."³⁴ The second part of the article focused on the socialization of domestic work (public institutions such as nurseries, kindergartens, catering establishments) as means to begin liberating women from their secular serfdom. Lenin's work and the first legislative steps took by the Soviet state were the starting point for the *ordinovista* group.³⁵ Following the guidelines of the Second Congress of the Communist International (July-August 1920), on February 24 1921, the magazine opened also a regular space dedicated to

³² For instance they supported the celebration of the 8th of March as international day of struggle against the socialists who saw it as a merely bourgeois deviation.

³³ Zino Zini, "Decadenza Borghese," *L'Ordine Nuovo* 33 (1920): 258; Vladimir Illich Lenin, "L'emancipazione delle donne," *L'Ordine Nuovo* 34 (1920): 271.

³⁴ Lenin, "A Great Beginning" *The Emancipation of Women* (New York: International Publisher, 1984), 63.

³⁵ A few months later, *L'Ordine Nuovo* publishes a detailed account of the new welfare of the soviet state with precise measure directed toward the protection of women and children. See A. Vinkuf, "L'assicurazione sociale nella Russia dei Soviet," *L'Ordine Nuovo* 12 (1920): 93-95.

the emancipation of women entitled “*Tribuna delle donne*” (henceforward Women’s forum) which Camilla Ravera directed.

Unfortunately the first years of the birth of the PCd’I were rather troublesome. The split from the PSI narrowed the ranks of the militants, and with the rise of the fascist regime the first goal became merely survival. Consequently “the theoretical elaboration d[id] not always wave closely together with the practical activity.”³⁶ For instance, on the Women’s forum an important article like “*I diritti politici delle donne*” [Women’s political right] did not mention women’s suffrage.³⁷ Later, in “*Il nostro femminismo*” [Our feminism], probably the most important and articulated document on women’s emancipation elaborated by the PCd’I of the time, Camilla Ravera argues against Engels, that even in a future communist society, the family will not disappear, and that the woman “shall carry on a specific work from which she will not (for we do not want her) to abstain.”³⁸ Centuries of ghettoization made difficult for even the most emancipated vanguard of the proletariat to dissociate maternity from self-realization of women as free individuals. As Pieroni Bortolotti recalls “in a country where no one ever expanded the use of contraception, the idea that nine months of pregnancy not only made women unable to work, but also conditioned their whole life, did not look absurd at all, since life appeared precisely to be made of a cyclic succession of pregnancies.”³⁹

To buttress her position on abortion, which was already legalized in Soviet Union, Camilla Ravera quoted the case of a French worker who was convicted because she decided to have an abortion after her seventh child. Only after this dramatic example, could she declare that as long as “society will not consider

³⁶ Spano and Camarlinghi, 22.

³⁷ This position could be however a consequence of the alliance with the Bordiga’s fraction that was firmly abstentionist.

³⁸ Camilla Ravera, “Il nostro femminismo,” *L’Ordine Nuovo*, 10 March 1921.

³⁹ Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 106.

maternity a social function and take measures to remunerate it, maintaining women economically independent, it must be let to the worker's decision whether to have children" or not.⁴⁰ The heightened value that maternity held in Italian society prevented the *ordinovista* group from seeing clearly through the material meaning that the reproduction and care of labor-power had in a capitalist society. This is why, at a certain point, the search for the specificity of women's oppression swerved "toward nature, instead than toward society." The PdC'I organized the "*Comitati delle madri proletarie*" [Association of proletarian women] in order to solve the contradiction between "sex and class," but these attempts were both theoretically and practically ineffectual.⁴¹ What was missing in the new party was "the political experience" to fight against the stereotype of "the woman as mother and wife that every reactionary could use against single mothers or single spouses" trying to realize themselves outside the family.⁴² Notwithstanding these limitations, the political life of the organization showed evidence of more courageous positions, especially thanks to those young female factory workers who were finding in the party a more useful and open instrument of class struggle than in the unions or the PSI.⁴³

In any case, despite a certain degree of familism, the real novelty introduced by the Turin group was *class cleavage* [*frattura di classe*]. The PdC'I clung to the idea that it was through a fully democratic and equalitarian access to labor and producer's control that workers would be emancipated. Hence the party never hesitated in defending the principle of equal pay for equal work, and was always firmly opposed to the forced return home of women.⁴⁴ Yet it was not only through labor that women's

⁴⁰ "Il mestiere della maternità," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 10 May 1921; as Camilla Ravera recalls, Gramsci himself was suggesting to be prudent on the matter, see, Interview, *Le compagne* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1979), 59.

⁴¹ Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 76.

⁴² Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 106.

⁴³ Pieroni Bortolotti, *Femminismo e partiti*, 107.

⁴⁴ "Concorrenza femminile sul lavoro," *L'Ordine Nuovo*, 10 May 1921.

independence was to be attained. Following Lenin's and Alexandra Kollontaj's work, the Women's Forum began investigating certain features of domestic oppression. Outflanking the Socialist position, they stated that women's subjection was due to unpaid domestic labor. This labor was still considered unproductive because it created use value and not material products, but its recognition as labor marks the first step toward the politicization of a dimension that was previously seen as impolitical. The work of reproduction was socially necessary labor and women did it without any recognition. For those who were also working in factories, this meant a double burden, or double serfdom. Camilla Ravera clearly marked the difference between this and Anna Kuliscioff's approach, recognizing that "woman's entrance into production did not solve the problem of her liberation; it is in fact its cornerstone."⁴⁵

The project the party put forward was to socialize the private work carried out in the house and to integrate it into a public industry that would liberate women from their "unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery."⁴⁶ Very little was done to develop these structures because workers' organizations were under constant attack, but the search for practical solutions helped clarify and deepen some of the theoretical points that Gramsci would later touch on in his discussion of Americanism and Fordism. As the dispositions of the first national conference of the communist women, March 22 1922, Rome, declared:

Proletarian families strongly dislike restaurants and commercial cooked food. This is due to the fact that restaurants and eateries, because of their commercial nature, do not care for food salubrity [...] but were their

⁴⁵ Ravera, *Breve storia*, 102.

⁴⁶ Lenin, "A Great Beginning," 64.

commercial nature eliminated along with the distributors of food, these institution would save women a good deal of their most unpleasant toil.⁴⁷

Food is one of the pillars of domesticity. Its preparation falls outside the realm of commodity production because it involves a labor (usually feminine) that, as Lenin stated above, is unproductive. It does not produce commodities to be exchanged but use values for the benefit of the family. In other words, it helps in *reproducing* private relations within the family, hence the emotional charge that explains the mistrust that proletarians had towards a nutrition largely based on cafeterias' food.⁴⁸ As for Fordism, the new party upheld its own program for the modernization of society. This meant rationalizing not only production but also all those activities involved in reproduction that constituted added labor for women. Intervening on the matter meant breaking away from the daily work of preparing food and becoming more active within the collective life of the community. In an age of scarcity, consumption of goods was a key element of emancipation. Consequently the construction of a network of services that provided more resources not for profit meant fuelling the process of socialization for the whole proletarian class and, at the same time, implied the beginning of the liberation of women from domestic work.

The PCd'I followed the egalitarian premises of early Leninism and used it as a safeguard against the numerous climb-downs of the PSI. Gramsci's reflection on subordinate subjectivities helped the communist members build concretely a political platform based on the recognition of the specificity of women's subordination within capitalist society. To summarize: 1) "socially productive," but unpaid domestic chores,

⁴⁷ Ravera, *Breve storia*, 121.

⁴⁸ Obviously we are talking about cheap cooking; real restaurants were off limits for the lower class.

had to be superseded through socialization; 2) economic independence had to be secured through access to labor without discriminations; 3) marriages were private contracts that could be dissolved; 4) women should decide on childbearing – this issue remained the most problematic of all. All these elements converged in the direction of a female subjectivity that has the concrete means to develop herself as a individual, who has the time and the possibility to avoid the subordination to the “flesh and blood convulsion” assigned to her by the patriarchal order.⁴⁹

In the clandestine network of the party this stress on women’s subjectivity continued throughout the dictatorship and especially during the Resistance, when women also played a fundamental role militarily. During the war, because of the exceptionality of the situation and the regression caused by twenty years of fascist dictatorship, the last two points (divorce and abortion) were shelved. Similarly no progress was made during the reconstruction, for the PCI, rapidly enlarging its base and political influence, invested heavily on winning the Catholic vote that was resistant to these reforms.⁵⁰ Yet in a society that was rapidly changing, the first two pillars of the PdC’I political platform were also wearing a bit thin. One thing is to create a network of services in a revolutionary environment where workers control production; another is to win small spaces of freedom, such as town kindergartens, or cooperative cafeterias in the context of a passive revolution.

Notwithstanding Article 37 of the new constitution that decreed same salaries and equal rights to work, when women for instance began working again, they faced

⁴⁹ On the problem of female subjectivity and patriarchal thought see Adele Cambria, *In principio era Marx*, 43-44.

⁵⁰ The PCI voted for instance the ratification of the Lateran Treaty (article 7 of the Italian constitution) thus recognizing the sacred and indissoluble nature of marriage, see Teresa Noce, 372-373; for a critical appraisal of the partisan’s movement of resistance and the women see Giulian Beltrami, “Le donne nella resistenza combattevano ma per chi?” *Effè* 3 (1975): 10-13 and Maria Casalini, *Le donne della sinistra (1944-1948)* (Roma: Carocci, 2005), 64-107; for a harsh critique of PCI politics see also Perry Anderson, “An Invertebrate Left,” *London Review of Books*, 12 March 2009, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n05/ande01_.html>.

the usual situation of being underpaid, while had to continue their never-ending toils at home. Here things did not improve much either. The Italian mentality was still largely molded by the fascist image of the woman as a guardian angel of the household. Even among the party, familism remained a taboo buttressed by a form of secular Puritanism and the imperative to reach emancipation through work in the factory. We return here to the double call to discipline in the factory and at home that the Fiat workers read on the walls of their plant after the war ended.

Among the base of the party the situation was at times even worse. Old forms of prejudice reappeared. The Socialist adagio that the women's vote was naturally conservative had to be publicly rebutted by Togliatti during the *Conferenza nazionale delle ragazze comuniste* [National conference of the communist girls] in 1955.⁵¹ Despite electoral data showing the contrary, militants were still convinced that the women's vote had caused the Christian Democrat to win. In certain industrial sectors, the very union legitimated the issue of underpayment. With the agreement of July 1960, the CGIL agreed with the industrialists to enforce equal pay on the basis of professional qualifications. Jobs were classified as mixed duties, women's duties, and men's duties. Equal pay applied only to the latter where women were, as the qualification reveals, an absolute minority.⁵²

If the Gramscian stance could have avoided the same old PSI mistakes, the PCI was instead more likely to fall prey to the traditionalist discourse. The movements that emerged in the sixties strongly criticized this policy. The formula *emancipation through work plus socialization of private work* went around in circles. Confronted by a new generation of women, this plan quickly showed that it was not only ineffective,

⁵¹ Togliatti, 10.

⁵² Lucia Chisté, "Note su: Sviluppo del capitale e lotte delle donne dalla 'ricostruzione' agli anni settanta," *Oltre il lavoro domestico. Il lavoro delle donne tra produzione e riproduzione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979), 57.

but rather that it was part of the problem. Neo-feminism in particular, was very effective in attacking familism and here it made its most important theoretical discovery. This discovery was born out of the urgency of a more comprehensive understanding of the role of reproduction within capitalist society and of the role of the family and the power structure created by the social exchange occurring between the man, the woman and their children. The set of factors tied to reproduction were key for understanding the historical reasons for the disappointment of women's aspirations by the political representatives of the proletarian class. These secular mechanisms of exploitation within the class itself had to be clearly mapped in order to build a new knowledge that would serve as the basis for a new political practice of liberation.

This new capacity of analysis also meant a return to Gramsci. It was a reading against the grain and against the official communist vulgate and the link that Togliatti had impressed on Gramsci's work as he proceeded to publish it.⁵³ As Bianca Maria Frabotta wrote, it was "precisely with the subject of the family that one could face [...] the complex Gramscian articulation regarding the relations between civil society and the state."⁵⁴ The new politicization of the private entailed the scandal of a solid critique of the sacredness of the family.

⁵³ See Raul Mordenti, "«I quaderni dal carcere» di Antonio Gramsci" *Letteratura Italiana Einaudi. Le Opere*, vol. 4, (Torino: Einaudi, 1996), 18-20. A curious anecdote proves how influential was a certain traditionalist reading of Gramsci. During the parliamentary session of 1977, the Christian Democratic member of the parliament Guido Bernardi claimed that the PCI should reject the legalization of abortion on the account of the Horatian family, (i.e. monogamous and based on sexual repression) that Gramsci had claimed in the *Prison Notebooks*. Bernardi's intervention was certainly instrumental, but it is true that the position of the majority of the party on issues such as abortion and even divorce was not that far away from his. See my "Non ci sono risposte compagno Gramsci... non ancora alle tue domande. Soggettività e differenza sessuale: un dialogo tra Adele Cambria e Antonio Gramsci," *Carte Italiane* 4 (2008): 129-155. In any case, Togliatti did play a crucial role in avoiding Stalinist censure and enabling the free diffusion of Gramsci's work. See Guido Liguori, "Gramsci, l'acqua calda del *Corriere*," *Politica OnLine*, <<http://www.politicaonline.net/forum/showthread.php?t=62150>>.

⁵⁴ "Femminismo e lotta di classe," 218; see also Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna. Feminism in Italy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 28-30.

In the next pages, I will use Adele Cambria's work *Love as Revolution*, an excellent example of this dialogue, as a point of entry for discovering the biopolitical nature of a woman's work of reproduction. *Love as Revolution* is simultaneously an inquiry on the correspondence of the Gramsci's family and its theatrical translation into a play entitled *Nonostante Gramsci* (henceforward *Despite Gramsci*). I will then expand my observations on this piece, including the neo-feminist re-formulation, based on the exploitation of sexual difference as well as of the whole system of production. It is also through a critical approach to Gramsci that some neo-feminists will elaborate a new theory about subordinate subjectivities. Gramsci had developed the latter beginning from factory workers. Neo-feminists instead, will elaborate it out of sexual difference and its vicissitudes in the private sphere of the household.

4.2 *Despite Gramsci: Love as Revolution*

The work of Adele Cambria (Reggio Calabria, 1931) grows out of the most intense years of the students' and workers' revolt. Their mass antagonism, with their slogans, songs and marches had something deeply theatrical in it, and theatre was in fact a popular and relatively cheap way to propagandize their attack on the status quo.⁵⁵ Their critique of authoritarianism was directed toward all pillars of Italian society: the family, the state, the school. When perceived as authoritarian institution, the PCI also received its fair amount of criticism. Part of this effort aimed at re-interpreting Marxist theory in light of the female question. Gramsci was no exception.

⁵⁵ See Mariela Boggio, ed., *Le Isabelle. Dal teatro della Maddalena alla Isabella Andreini*, vol. 1, (Nardo: Besa Editrice, 2002), 17. The two years 1974-75, when the play was first performed, were also a very fruitful and expansive period for *neo-feminism*. It is in this period that a larger "Female Movement" gains ground and thanks to the political struggle to vote down the abrogation of divorce in 1974, is able to form alliances with non feminist subjects political influencing cadres of the union and of the political parties. 1976 then is considered the true *annus mirabilis* for neo-feminism and the social movements involved in the long revolutionary wave.

In 1972 Maricla Boggio, an author associated with the same Roman feminist circle where Cambria operated, wrote with Franco Cuomo a play entitled *Compagno Gramsci* [Comrade Gramsci]. The play focused on the “rediscovery of the private of this leader of the historical left.”⁵⁶ At about the same time, Adele Cambria began sifting through documents that were considered of no interest. The letters and interviews she collected became *Despite Gramsci*. The base of the play was Cambria’s research, but the theatrical work was conceived collectively. The project, which was initially only a theatrical piece, was born out of a meeting of the La Maddalena group, the first Italian feminist theatre and cultural centre which was publishing the magazine *Effe*. Adele Cambria worked together with Francesca Pansa, Gloria Guasti, Laura Di Nola, and Lu Leone (the last two abandoned the project after a series of disagreements).⁵⁷ The play was eventually staged in 1974, but the critical apparatus (which included the play) was only published as a book two years later in 1976.

Let’s first look at the book. *Love as Revolution* is a typical instance of a feminist reversal and re-interpretation, from a different perspective, of a revolutionary thinker who had been become a secular icon for Italians. Yet it is also a keen critique of the stratification of social constraints set up in order to check women’s individuality. The work resembles the same movement toward liberation – i.e. a process of de-identification and then of re-identification into a new subjectivity –

⁵⁶ Maricla Boggio and Franco Cuomo, *Compagno Gramsci* (Padova: Marsilio, 1972); see also Adelaide Marigo, “Compagno Gramsci,” *Sipario* 311 (1972): 54-55.

⁵⁷ The theatre was part of a larger project that included a library and a magazine (*Effe*); they are all run by women, with Dacia Maraini as the inventor and other important contributors such as Maricla Boggio, Annabella Cerliani and Adele Cambria producing works that aimed to “know and let know the history of women’s oppression” to elaborate “an autonomous language created by women to talk about them,” and to “denounce the double exploitation suffered by proletarian women, by women and by women as subaltern class.” “La Maddalena teatro,” *Effe* 1 (1973): 57. On the birth of the Maddalena project see Maria Grazia Silvi, ed., *Il teatro delle donne* (Milano: La Salamandra, 1980), 76-90; Biancamaria Frabotta, ed., “La Politica del femminismo,” *Il movimento femminista, l’Unione delle donne italiane, le forze politiche di sinistra di fronte al femminismo nei documenti (1973-76)* (Roma: Savelli, 1978), 17-181; Boggio, *Le Isabelle*, 17-20. On Cambria’s critique of institutional figures of the left see Birnbaum, 176-178.

represented in a acute comic strip published by a feminist magazine of the time. Here women are portrayed as gift boxes with sad made-up eyes. As they meet in “consciousness-rising” [*autocoscienza*] sessions and build “real relationships,” they slowly strip off their bows and ribbons, growing faces, arms and legs. Finally, sketched in a fuzzy but visibly feminine figure, they are ready to sprint toward a new life.⁵⁸ The comic strip portrays this transition in a few rapid passages. Things are much more complicated than that, however, for more than in any other conflict, here the dominated subject is emotionally attached to her own oppressor and her image. Her pleasantness, although mediated and negotiated in the long subterranean conflict between the sexes, is a crucial component of her oppression. The same struggle with the beloved – Gramsci, the father of Italian Communism – informs Cambria’s work. The latter is certainly not *against Gramsci*, but it does comply with the need to bracket him and to read across the limitations of his male-revolutionary image in order to reach the life of the women who were with him. As Cambria asserts:

I was interested in verifying some hypotheses I made, that is to say that Julia was neither epileptic, nor suffered from cerebral anemia, in short that she was not crazy, but alienated by the kind of relationship that she had with Gramsci. Furthermore that this alienation was generalizable and that it was the exemplary fruit of women’s subalternity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Biancamaria Frabotta, ed., *Femminismo*, 18. In an analogous strip one sees a woman hanging her clothes in a closet that ends up wrapped up in a storage bag, see *Sottosopra* (1974): 19.

⁵⁹ Ivelise Ghione and Paolo Luca Donati, Interview with Adele Cambria, “La donna è mobile anche a teatro,” *Sipario* 359 (1976): 10.

It is the specificity of the struggle of women that forms the architectural element of this critique. But doing away “with feminine oppression” does not imply “suppressing the feminine,” nor does breaking away from males. It rather means assuming the partial point of view of the oppressed to construct a new identity, or as Gramsci himself put it a “new feminine identity.”⁶⁰ Cambria’s aim is not to portray Gramsci and his family, but rather to sketch a “biography of affects” from the point of view of the women: Julia (Gramsci’s wife), Tania and Eugenia Schucht (Gramsci’s sisters in law).

This reversal is also the practical realization of the key discovery of neo-feminism: that the private of Gramsci’s women is of political import.⁶¹ The first political meaning of this inquiry is historiographical. As I mentioned *Love as Revolution* is the result of a previous archival work that Adele Cambria carried out leafing through the unpublished and forgotten letters written by Julia, Tania and Eugenia. It covers their epistolary exchange with Gramsci and their early correspondence as young ladies traveling between Russia and Italy. Tatiana’s and Julia’s letters were in fact left buried in the dust in the archive of the Istituto Gramsci in Rome, since, as the critics would say, they were letters that “only talked about jam and babies. Insignificant.”⁶² Cambria’s first contribution is to re-establish a historiographical matter of fact, for Gramsci’s letters are usually read as if they were a monologue, without taking into account its true dialogical nature.⁶³ Secondly, Cambria makes a point against a male-oriented critique that considers the private as gossip (feminine non-value) and the public (male value) as the sole scientific

⁶⁰ Biancamaria Frabotta, “Contraddizione e trasgressione. Sulla specificità del femminile,” *Aut Aut* 161 (1977): 78; Gramsci, *Selections from the Prisons Notebooks*, 296.

⁶¹ Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice doesn’t. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 3.

⁶² Adele Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione* (Milano: SugarCo Edizioni, 1976), 236.

⁶³ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1987), 87.

dimension worth inquiring about. But the added value of this women's perspective consists also in digging out the stories of the authors of those letters, that is to say those "biographies that remain individual history." Thus they are useless since, as it happens too often with women's narratives, they are seized away from "that collective history, that common set" of experience, which women should instead employ to fashion "their own courses of life."⁶⁴

Lastly, by taking into account "women's reasons," this inquiry also provides new insights into Gramsci's prison's years.⁶⁵ There are interesting questions regarding this period that usually remain in the shadow. For instance, why was Gramsci practically abandoned by his wife Julia after he was sentenced to twenty years of prison by the fascist regime? What was the nature of Tatiana's help, who not only saved Gramsci's notebooks but also "assured his very physical survival"?⁶⁶ And finally what was the role played by the other sister-in-law, Eugenia, who practically raised Gramsci's sons in Russia?

These figures re-emerge from oblivion (or the crystallized image that history passed down) to tell their life. Cambria reconstructs the personal relationships, the affective dimension of this family, focusing on the sternness of the life of subjects who were in a perennial struggle with forces larger than themselves. It is what Adele Cambria calls the "dialectic of interpersonal relations between the colonized" that rules the interaction between Julia, Tatiana and Eugenia Schucht, who were raised following the bourgeois model of their time, in a high class Russian family in decline, during the turbulent years of the end of the Tsarist regime.⁶⁷ For all of them those

⁶⁴ Anna Rita Calabrò and Laura Grasso, eds., *Dal Movimento Femminista al Femminismo Diffuso* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1985), 19.

⁶⁵ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 11.

⁶⁶ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 11.

⁶⁷ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 25.

bows and ribbons adorning the female figure were larger social constraints that determined their decisions, their goals and behavior.

Cambria's archival work strips away, for instance, Eugenia's character – and the play will emphasize this point even more – of the kind of heroic aura that official history had created around her. Cambria is more interested in outlining the reverse process Eugenia undergoes: instead of liberation through politicization, she suffers a progressive enslavement, for she follows a masculine stereotype. As it appears from her early letters, in her youth, even if always quite independent, Eugenia was also sentimental and gifted with a humanitarian disposition. Only later, after her teaching experience in Poland, will Eugenia go back to Russia to be trained as a rifleman to fight for the revolution. She is the first to meet Gramsci and to become infatuated with him in 1922, when both were hospitalized in the Serebrianyi Bor sanatorium near Moscow. Already a dominating figure among her sisters, after the revolution she became the personal secretary of Lenin's wife. Eugenia's politicization does not lead to a real emancipation, but only to an acquisition of power and prestige. In Cambria's analysis she becomes the paradoxical product of a "romantic education" that blocks a woman's personality by binding it to the fantasy of marriage. The failing of this fantasy creates a crisis that emphasizes a typical "idealistic rejection of any bargaining with everyday life" that make her adopt a voluntaristic (almost patriarchal) attitude.⁶⁸ Her education followed her father's prescriptions, Apollo Schucht, a Tsarist officer who, because of his hostility against the regime, was interned in Siberia.⁶⁹ This is how Teresa De Lauretis summarizes Apollo Schucht's late-romantic pedagogy:

⁶⁸ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 49, 48.

⁶⁹ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 37.

a sense of duty toward the poor and dispossessed; contact with nature as a source of happiness, goodness, and personal fulfillment; the love of children idealized as a pure unspoiled manifestation of Good Nature; a sentimental attachment to Family as nest and shelter from the disorder and potential danger of the outside world.⁷⁰

Pushed toward this unreachable ideal of love and family, unable to “realize her own affective life” and turned down by Gramsci, who fell for her younger and more beautiful sister, Eugenia reacts by emasculating herself, devoting herself to the Bolshevik cause and becoming the severe guardian of Julia and Gramsci’s sons.⁷¹ It is here that her process of emasculation culminates, when her initial “affective richness” turns into the morbid “possessiveness” over Julia and her sons.⁷² In Cambria’s dialectic of the colonized, Eugenia represents the subaltern who climbs the social ladder enough to push down those who are a step below. Cambria’s close scrutiny of Eugenia is more sympathetic than the theatrical representation: the goal is to understand the mechanisms that block her personality not simply to hold her up as negative example.

Tatiana, commonly known as Tania, was the oldest daughter and studied medicine in Rome. She is the most obscure figure of the three sisters. It is difficult to trace her life after the whole Schucht family moved back to Russia during the Revolution. She remained in Rome, but hid from acquaintances, because she was supposedly afraid of receiving bad news about her family.⁷³ Tania resurfaced from

⁷⁰ De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, 87.

⁷¹ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 37.

⁷² Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 18.

⁷³ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 81-83.

depths of history thanks to Gramsci, who had been asked to look for her by the Schucht family. With Gramsci's imprisonment and Julia's departure for Soviet Union, she becomes a veritable double of Julia, the substitute of his wife, and the only channel that Gramsci had to reach his family. Tania is atrophied and limited in the full expression of her affectivity because of morals and Gramsci himself, who was still in love with Julia and would never consent to have a relationship with her.⁷⁴

Notwithstanding the strictly fraternal love with Gramsci, Tania takes care of him following all his transfers, working to provide for his basic needs, and does so nearly twenty years in total abnegation. Tania embodies another recurrent persona that society had constructed for women: the charitable figure, the nurse who sacrifices herself for her man.

Finally we have Julia, the "most beautiful and feminine" of the sisters. At the beginning she seems to balk at Gramsci's courtship, but then she falls for him not because of the typical masculine insistence, but because of Antonio's sensibility and perhaps because of the projection of Eugenia's desire. Since her young years spent studying violin in Rome, Julia was dominated by Eugenia's stronger personality.⁷⁵ Things remained the same even after the beginning of her relationship with Gramsci. Cambria stresses Eugenia's absolute power over Julia, especially when the former decided they all had to leave Rome – including the first born, Delio – at least three months before Gramsci's arrest, when there was no immediate danger for them.⁷⁶ Julia's figure emerges as a "mild and sweet woman" certainly subjected to more dominant figures, but with a "profound and yet frail will to rebellion."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Gramsci told Tania that for Julia's good, a consensual (and illegal for the times in Italy) divorce would have been the best option. See *Letters from Prison*, vol. 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 228-230.

⁷⁵ On Eugenia see Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 34-56, and note 2, 59.

⁷⁶ See Umberto Terraccini remarks in Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, note 2, 59.

⁷⁷ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 34.

If Tania chooses the almost gratifying role of total abnegation, Julia is instead crushed by the heavy demands that society imposed. Firstly as a woman and a mother, secondly as a Russian Bolshevik and lastly as *the* wife of Antonio Gramsci, Julia ends up in the cumbersome alleys of mental illness. This is how Cambria sketches the relationship between the two sisters and Gramsci:

Tatiana is *presence* inasmuch as Julia is *absence*, she is fullness as opposed to the void; but Tatiana gains the however still relative plenitude of her relations with Gramsci through *sacrifice, abnegation the complete annihilation* of herself. This is a situation which on the contrary Julia has tried to resist without having the capacity [...] retreating in the alternative of mental illness.⁷⁸

During the various hospitalizations that punctuated her long life, Julia was treated with electroshock. Her silent resistance explains the key role in Cambria's work. While Tania gives in to her sacrificial role, comforted by the "heinous-sweet right of *not seeing* her own oppression," Julia instead lives through that irreconcilable situation until she slides into a desperate final de-personalization.⁷⁹

Adele Cambria decides to close Julia's portrayal with her last letter, dated 1964 and addressed to Gramsci's brother (Carlo) that appeared on the red banners of the PCI during Togliatti's funeral. At this point Julia talks about her beloved as "the father

⁷⁸ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 131-132. This interpretation though seems disputed by the Gramsci grandson who, in a recent article affirms that his grandmother suffered from "organic epilepsy, a complication due to the Spanish flu that she developed in 1927, and not nervous breakdown." Antonio Gramsci Jr. "Quanti errori su mio nonno," *L'Unità online*, 21 Nov. 2007, <[http://www.dsmilano.eu/home/index.php/5righe/2007/11/21/quanti_errori_su_mio_nonno_di_antonio](http://www.dsmilano.eu/home/index.php/5righe/2007/11/21/quanti_errori_su_mio_nonno_di_antonio_gr)
^{gr}>.

⁷⁹ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 132, 195.

of her sons” and “creator of the PCI.”⁸⁰ Gramsci blurs into his secular icon, while Julia fades away in the hospitalizations of the Soviet sanatoriums. Yet among the three sisters, Julia is the “most contemporaneous,” fighting a subterranean, almost spontaneous war against the insolvable contradiction inherited by her modern bourgeois family.⁸¹

A peculiar episode of Julia’s life discloses her hidden war. While in prison, Gramsci had received allowance money for his job as a journalist and then sent it to Julia through a friend in Russia. When she received it she turned it down. In this instinctive refusal--which looks apparently irrational, since the family was going through hard economic times--Cambria reads, using the key of the unconscious, Julia’s opposition to “the legitimacy of an abstract paternity.”⁸² With “abstract paternity,” Cambria alludes to the role of a pure economic tutor that the father plays in a patriarchal society, at least until his progeny actively engages social life. The long silence of Julia seems to be readable also as a response to the unbearable situation of Gramsci’s imprisonment. Those twenty years of absence she had to face could not be sublimated in the romantic rhetoric of distance and waiting: the true trial that it was believed to strengthen love. The concreteness of the relationship with her husband for Julia was a material necessity.⁸³

Thus silence, not writing letters, even if she felt them as marks of a guilty impotence, were after all the only resources, the only way available for her to push back, or at

⁸⁰ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 195.

⁸¹ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 34.

⁸² Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 80.

⁸³ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 17, 102-103.

least refuse, the codification of the unreality that
constrained her.⁸⁴

Applying Shulamith Firestone's theories, Cambria foregrounds also the fact that the power distribution in their relationship was, as usual, unbalanced in favor of Gramsci, even if he was in prison and she was free in communist Russia.⁸⁵ This remark raised scandal at the time not only because it seemed a specious argument to a male oriented audience, but also because Gramsci represented the figure of an intellectual who, as we have seen, did reflect on the relations between man and woman, and certainly was much more aware of the paternalistic approach that progressive intellectuals professed. But for Cambria the love relationship between Antonio and Julia can be read in light of a common social disparity, which would explain Julia's behavior and illness.

The object of Cambria's work is not only the genealogical inquiry of these women. As she states from the beginning of her work, the key point here is also the question brought about by 1968: "how to love as a communist?"⁸⁶ How to connect love and politics? It is here, Cambria argues, where the discrepancy between Julia Schucht and Antonio Gramsci arises. Gramsci had chosen the revolution and for that he was killed, Julia had chosen him and for that she slowly died alone. If it is through socialization that individuals grow and fulfill their emotional needs, in a patriarchal society, women, as segregated subjects, can do so only within the family, whereas men have several options, and politics is one of them.⁸⁷ The absence of the object of her investment, Antonio Gramsci, and the "insolvable conflict" of its impossible

⁸⁴ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 17, 104.

⁸⁵ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1970); Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 69-78, 106.

⁸⁶ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 7.

⁸⁷ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 74.

realization slowly devoured her until the end, as it did with many women throughout history.⁸⁸

The Play

How was it possible to pass from the careful analysis of a series of correspondences, to a play? The group of actors, writers and the theatrical designers that collaborated at the staging of *Despite Gramsci* decided to hold on Cambria's thesis, but the staging of this "thesis play" split the audience.⁸⁹ While the public welcomed the performance, the critics rather were generally more skeptical. Adelaide Ceraioli, for instance, argued that the play resulted in "a reading too strenuously biased and not completely justified when compared with the volume of the Gramscian epistolary."⁹⁰ Reading it today, the text appears less trenchant in its thesis, even at times poetic. After the pull-out of the two original directors (Laura di Nola and Lu Leone), the group opted for a self-managed direction that proved very effective, despite the technical deficiencies and the lack of means of the facility they had at their disposal.

"Without a stage, with three barely raised platforms" the Maddalena Theatre was located in Stelletta Street in Rome. The place was a small U-shape basement that had been previously used as a print shop.⁹¹ There were no real funds available, but the way the group organized the theatrical space represented a good compromise between what they wanted to do and the physical obstacles they were facing. Besides a screen projecting slides and pictures, the traditional central stage was split into three separated spaces that broke the audience's unitary vision. The collective used three

⁸⁸ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 236.

⁸⁹ Adelaide Ceraioli, review of *Compagno Gramsci*, by Maricla Boggio and Franco Cuomo, *Sipario* 349-350 (1975): 45.

⁹⁰ Ceraioli, 46.

⁹¹ "La Maddalena teatro," *Effe* 1 (1974): 55.

different platforms where the three Schucht sisters acted: the main central stage was occupied by Julia; Eugenia was on the right inside of the stage, Tatiana at the very end of the auditorium. The disruption of a fixed and central point of view followed the example of experimental theatre of the time, and put into practice the critique of the customary visual perspective that favored the power position, the highest and central point of visibility, that the sovereign held in Elizabethan theatre.⁹² It was also the incarnation of the philosophy of the Maddalena theatre, strenuously committed to giving “representation to all women,” including “those that who had never had the floor although they had voice and thoughts. Above all,” the group argued, “we had to engender their direct presence, rather than one narrated by others, as it had always happened until then.”⁹³

As the sisters’ emotions and feelings took over the sequential structure of the biography the narrative linearity was dismantled. Voices had priority over movement, and the acting in itself lost importance as the engine of the story. It is the voices and the numerous quotations that, as “visualization[s] of theatrical words,” sustained narrative.⁹⁴ Actors were constantly on the stage even when they were not involved in the scene. Their presence had thus to be engaged during long periods of non-action, devising a routine and a gestural expressiveness to fill in the time. The role of scenographic setting was enhanced also thanks to specific apparatuses: the truss-structure [*struttura-trousse* or *arredo-trousse*]. This tall rectangular sculpture was a sort of cubicle that hosted the actor. It created a fluid space that mediated the “passage from the inside of the individual to the outside of the stage.”⁹⁵ These structures re-

⁹² See Stephen Greenblatt, “Invisible bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion,” *Glyph* 8 (1981): 40-61; Christopher Pye, “The Sovereign, the Theatre, and the Kingdom of Darknesse: Hobbes and the Spectacle of Power,” *Representations* 8 (1984): 84-106.

⁹³ Boggio, *Le Isabelle*, 20.

⁹⁴ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 210.

⁹⁵ Renato Cambor, “1960/1970 tra realtà e rappresentazione,” *Studio Solingo Arte Contemporanea*, <<http://www.studiosoligo.it/mambor/testomambor.html>>.

enacted the paradox in which the characters dwelled. In the first act, never fully visible, Gramsci occupied a space that recalled his youth Sardinian setting, while in the second he moved around his cell. Eugenia, Julia, and Tania acted in a domestic environment.

The only character who moved freely between the platforms and the public was the Girl. She represented the critical “counterpoint” of the whole story, the contemporary feminist narrator who dug out the three Schucht sisters from history.⁹⁶ She framed chronologically the story, addressed the characters, showed slides on the screens, and quoted feminist poems and Alexandra Kollontaj’s thoughts. Furthermore, she staged the Orpheus-Girl who rescues her sisters Eurydice. Even if embodying the didactic moment, the Orpheus-Girl was not exempted from a certain poetic allure and skepticism about the magniloquence of politics.

In the play her interventions are scattered during the sequence of dialogues and the overall effect is that of a mosaic of voices that proceeds by way of consonances, more than on the progressive development of the narrative. This mosaic is then welded together by the Orpheus-Girl’s ideological slogans that condense the voices in a sort of theoretical rippling of the waves of language. These theoretical points follow to a certain extent the guidelines of Cambria’s book, but the didactic interventions of the Orpheus-Girl are the novelty of the play; they lay a bridge between the past and the present.

Here I want to focus briefly on two of the Orpheus-Girl’s orations that disclose the problem of the political nature of the private and its historical stratifications.

Women’s talks

Butter and milk talks,

⁹⁶ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 210.

Soured at times,
Staircase and kitchen talks
Talks on the butcher's balcony
Or shouted
From the hairdresser drier.
Women's talk
Trivial talks
Ghetto talks of
lies and gossips.
But if our private becomes
Our political
And the political the private
entering in our blood
Then you will know
Why to hate the
Mournful trophy of fascism.⁹⁷

Women's talks, gossips, in short domesticity as a reservoir in which women are confined is a microcosm expressing a whole system of social relations. The study of this domain will unearth the true political meaning of this relationality. The Orpheus-Girl asks to politicize the private, but also to use that private as a political base. In so doing the dead-like nature of the woman fashioned by fascism emerges in all its articulations. Yet, what is this mournful trophy? And how are we to understand the Orpheus-Girl's apparently circular argument of a private that becomes political and

⁹⁷ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 249.

vice versa? The link between fascism and the condition of women deserves closer attention.

Among the many crimes consummated by the regime, the oppression of Italian women was probably the least noticeable one, especially in the Italian society of the time which, as I argued, was already ruled by patriarchalism. But the invisibility of this offence against women renders explicit the subterranean link between fascist mentality and women's disfranchisement in contemporary society. The "mournful trophy of fascism" [*"trofeo luttuoso del Fascio"*] represents the climax of a series of behaviors and actions that, disguised as praise and protection of the natural virtues of womanhood, emphasized the strict control of femininity under the notion of maternity and the superior interest of the nation. Fascism is crucial for understanding certain apparently contradictory features of biopolitical control, that is, of a control that sinks into the personhood of the individual.

The lack of political actions of the pre-dictatorship government was filled up by the strict measures of the fascist regime. Mussolini created and propagated a "mystique of natality" whose focus was the Italian woman who had to have more babies in order to increase the Italian population and reach the supposedly crucial number of sixty million people by the middle of the twentieth Century. Thus laws discouraging emigration were enforced and large works of land reclamations carried out in order to limit processes of urbanization and increase the peasant population that notoriously gave birth to more children.⁹⁸ Until the war made it possible, the government drove women away from their jobs and pushed them back in the house.

⁹⁸ Alisa Del Re "Politiche demografiche e controllo sociale in Francia Italia e Germania negli anni '30," *Stato e rapporti sociali di sesso* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1988), 137-138; on the women's question under Fascism see also Capezzuoli and Cappabianca, 125-134; Birnbaum, 31-40; Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, *La donna nera: consenso femminile e fascismo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976); Robin Pickering-Iazzi, "Unseduced Mothers. Configurations of Different Female Subject Transgressing Fascistized Femininity," *Feminine Feminists. Cultural Practices in Italy*, Giovanna Miceli Jeffries ed., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

Some of those laws (fiscal deductions, loans to families, and prizes for those who gave birth to at least three children) were passed as necessary protections for women and their welfare while, others punished directly those who did not contribute to this system. As a consequence, taxes were imposed on bachelors who had not procreated. Birth control was banished and abortion considered a crime against the race.⁹⁹ The fascist regime was intensely biopolitical in the control of life at its most biological level. Women were truly the trophy of this enormous plan of social engineering, for they were the prey that had to be domesticated and put to work. Their work was unambiguously reproductive, but once reproduction is invested with such legislative measures, its politicization is inevitable even if hidden by the rhetoric of the biological/natural role played by women. For neo-feminism the politicization of this private fact came thus now under a new light. It showed how little privacy there was in private lives, how reproduction and the woman's body was a territory of the state apparatus.¹⁰⁰

In this respect, fascism marks only a quantitative difference from the capitalist society of post-war Italy. This is especially the case when we consider fascism from a Gramscian perspective – that is to say, as a passive revolution, a modernization in which a certain redistribution of wealth is carried on without changing the privileges and the hierarchy of the social structure. The importance of controlling the production of labor-power appears now explicitly connected to the changes in the mode of production (Fordism). Thus the emphasis on demographic policy reveals the ultimate plan of capitalist modernization that fascism carried out: Fordism “commanded a new conception of the value of labor force.” In the thirties, within industrialized countries,

⁹⁹ Del Re, “Politiche demografiche,” 138-140.

¹⁰⁰ Alisa Del Re, “Struttura capitalistica del lavoro legato alla riproduzione,” *Oltre il lavoro domestico*, 35; see also David G. Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

there was a shift “from the protection of the working-woman (if she was young *qua* sexual commodity, if she was older *qua* producer) to the protection of the woman as mother in order to *protect the progeny*.”¹⁰¹ It is in the formation of a new labor-force that one sees the priceless commodity on the market, so that even if the fascist propaganda seemed more inclined toward an anti-capitalist (ruralist) policy, it did contribute to this trend globally. The ideological support for this plan was the return to a feminine figure completely defined by her productive role and the strengthening of families as “state controlled units of social stabilization.”¹⁰²

This is the biopolitical novelty that the Italian case shows in an amplified form: the mass use of a “political subject (women)” homogenized by “the determination of a biological role as political role.”¹⁰³ As fascism explicitly politicized the private dimension, neo-feminism could use it as a counter model to clarify the ways in which sexual oppression is articulated through a series of legislative measures and ideological apparatuses. The liberticidal actions of fascism went far beyond the fact that they were enforced by a dictatorship. As I will show, there is continuity between economic exploitation and sexual oppression. In this, the Orpheus-Girl’s claim that the private is political, and vice versa, acquires full meaning. The private is political in that it is the subject of a public intervention. At the same time, the political is also the private because of what the latter embodies: the conflict and exploitation occurring in the work of reproduction.

Capital and state regulations are not only formal laws imposed on individual. They rely on a deep structure made of psychological necessities, sentimental attachments, personal aspirations, desire... one is generically called *love*.

¹⁰¹ Del Re, “Politiche demografiche,” 121.

¹⁰² Del Re, “Politiche demografiche,” 144. Catharine A. MacKinnon called “gender and family” the “congealed forms” of the heterosexual social structure. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard: Harvard University Press 1991).

¹⁰³ Del Re, “Politiche demografiche,” 144.

Stating/knowing the contradictions of this form of love can only trigger the search for a liberation in which the mark of oppression is progressively erased, and where sexuality becomes a positive liberating force for society. Both Cambria's play and book highlight this feature as they strive for a response to Gramsci's question. This is the second oration that I want to explore. As the Orpheus-girl claims closing the play

There are no answers, comrade Gramsci
To your youthful question
To Julia:
If it is possible to love a mass
when one has never had strong feelings for anyone.
If it is possible to love a collective
Without having loved anyone [...]
There are no answers, comrade Gramsci,
Yet there is a choice we refuse:
Love or revolution,
Liberation for the masses or
Liberation for oneself,
Man, woman.

Gramsci asked this famous question in a letter to Julia, articulating the deep unsolved emotional substratum that links politics with life. In a certain way, this represents a reversal of the fascist program: here the politicization of the private, of what is considered non-political is expressed in terms of relationality, as the caring for other individuals beyond the "pure mathematical calculation" that takes the politician

toward his or her goal.¹⁰⁴ So the framing of the problem is correct, but the practical answers are still far away. Feminists felt that these answers had to come mainly from them, since the standard mentality of the male militants who were involved in 1968 reiterated habits and behaviors that crippled the political dimension of love. Notwithstanding his repulsion against the idolatry of men, as a secular icon of martyrdom for the Italian left, Gramsci himself came to represent the example of a revolutionary leader ready to pay the highest price. It was inevitable that his ascetic aura provoked a certain desire for emulation among young and committed intellectuals of the Student Movement. But this old form of male engagement was in itself the result of a power position. Its cynical application lead to dangerous forms of politics: the sort of politics that was always ready to ask for sacrifices in the name of a higher interest.

From the specific perspective of women's subordination, the question that the Orpheus-Girl reformulates quoting Gramsci has several objectives. Within the private dimension, the same sexual intercourse is part of the oppression. Against a new degree of economic independence and sexual liberty (thanks to contraception), neo-feminism still gauged what Gramsci called the "unhealthy characteristics" of sex. Part of it was due to the difficulty in overcoming a female identity built "on beauty as a condition for social acceptability" (the bows and ribbons of the comic strip I mentioned) that males enjoy so much.¹⁰⁵ A sexual image constructed and reiterated by a daily experience, in which one "perceives and comprehends as subjective... those relations – maternal, economic, and interpersonal – which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Antonio Gramsci, <http://www.marxmail.org/quotes/antonio_gramsci.htm>.

¹⁰⁵ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 15.

¹⁰⁶ Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice doesn't*, 159. From the "guardian angel of the house" to the "angel of the cyclostyle," or "angels of leafletting" the dissatisfaction with the role playing within the movement

Moreover it became clear, that even sexual emancipation was easily incorporated in the systematic exploitation that men carried over women. Especially within the movement, the rightful struggle against the sexual phobia of Italian society meant primarily a higher sexual availability for the comrade-in-arms. What at the beginning looked like an advancement, such as the partner's new attention for women's sexual pleasure, soon became another men's trophy: the reduction of "female orgasm to an objective measure of his virility." More and more women realized that "this revolution did not change love making; it made it simply more frequent, more possible, free, open and cheerful [...] nevertheless [it was] still suitable for male sexuality."¹⁰⁷ This was not something new in the history of female oppression. Men had many times masked their calculations under the more pleasurable camouflages of good manners, or as sixteenth Century Italian poet Moderata Fonte (1555-1592) stated in her treaty on the worth of women: men always recur to such practices, "pretending to do through courtesy, what they really do by artifice."¹⁰⁸

It is a narrow passage: you cannot deny your own pleasure, but this pleasure is also consistent with the emotional involvement with your own oppressor. Catharine Mackinnon said that "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away."¹⁰⁹ This situation resembles in fact that of the proletarian under the iron heel of capital, who is pressed by the paralyzing power of an identity imposed by his or her oppressor.

grew among female militants and lead eventually to separatist position. See Balestrini e Moroni, 488-496; Laura Grasso, *Compagno padrone. Relazioni interpersonali nelle famiglie operaie della sinistra tradizionale e della sinistra extraparlamentare* (Guaraldi Editore, 1974), 9.

¹⁰⁷ Giachetti, 89.

¹⁰⁸ Qtd. in Costance Jordan, "Renaissance Women Defending Women: Arguments Against Patriarchy" *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to the Present*, Maria Ornella Marotti, ed., (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 61.

¹⁰⁹ Mackinnon, 3.

The story of the Schucht sisters forms part of that feminist narrative that served as the purpose of women's liberation. It was a typical example of how neo-feminism needed to reclaim spaces that were erased from history because they constituted only the private part of somebody's history. But that private part was exactly the basic political dimension upon which a whole system of exploitation operated. The play may appear ungenerous to Gramsci, but even the preposition of the title, *despite*, discloses a bond which implicates the figure of the father of Italian communism. It is, in a way, an unavoidable dialogue, and a fruitful one I would argue. The theoretical break that Gramsci and the councils produced within the Italian political and philosophical scenario represents a pre-condition to any movement of liberation of a subaltern group. The difficulty that we too have as contemporary readers is that Gramsci's reflection is read through the lenses of the reorganization that occurred after his defeat. It is hard to formulate a positive line of action once part of those theories (such as the Fordism upheld by the Councils) is the very cage that locks a subordinate subjectivity.

But it is hard to formulate a positive line of action from the life of the Schucht sisters as well. There seems to be only a thin path that runs as a counter-relief to a thread of mistakes, losses and pain. This counter-relief signals what must be avoided and what must be criticized. It draws the contours of a social richness, a prolificacy of human relationships built "a non-dilapidated territory, or less dilapidated one, if compared to the increasing devitalization and drying up of the male."¹¹⁰ In order to lay out the scheme of this new social engineering, neo-feminism had to take the necessary steps into the unraveling of the biopolitical dimension that the work reproduction displays in a capitalist society. Through the staging of plays, the marches, the songs, these steps were clearly stated, beginning with their personal experience. As Teresa

¹¹⁰ Cambria, *In principio era Marx*, 43.

De Lauretis argues, the real question is “how to theorize that experience, which is at once social and personal, and how to construct the female subject from that political and intellectual rage.”¹¹¹ This personal rage meant several things: 1) a re-writing of history that would represent women, and their function and positionality in a patriarchal/capitalist society (i.e. the full explanation of the political nature of the private); 2) the critique of the use that male (and science) had made of female capacity to procreate as the “biological element validating the natural inferiority of women.”¹¹² 3) separatism (in the best Gramscian sense) as a way of defining clearly the systematic oppression that man exercised for centuries; 4) the awareness that women’s liberation would mean also man’s liberation; and 5) a set of concrete answers or actions to help this process.¹¹³ Let us turn to the specific analysis and solutions offered by *Lotta Femminista*.

4.3 Reproduction as the Kernel of Biopolitical Control

The Italian neo-feminist movement that grew out the turmoil of 1968 was highly heterogeneous. Scholars in fact prefer to use the plural “feminisms.”¹¹⁴ Neo-feminism privileged small-group activity and was bound to specific geographical places such as Milan, Trento, Rome, and Padua. The first important organized group (1965) was a small Milan-based collective called Demau. Standing for Demystification of Patriarchal Authoritarianism, it had a remarkable influence on the student and worker’s movement, because of its anti-institutional and anti-authoritarian

¹¹¹ De Lauretis *Alice doesn’t*, 166.

¹¹² Manuela Fraire and Biancamaria Frabotta, Introduzione, *Lessico politico delle donne: teorie del femminismo* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002), 12.

¹¹³ On female autonomy see Lia Cigarini, “Female separateness,” *Italian Feminist Thought*, Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, eds., 349-367. Rossana Rossanda, in particular, articulates this notion of separation by recalling that for Gramsci “no liberation movement is born without a stage of separation and negation, only then can you project outside yourself an affirmation that is no longer fragile,” Birnbaum, 151.

¹¹⁴ See Elda Guerra, “Femminismo/Femminismi: appunti per una storia da scrivere” *Genesis* 1 (2004): 87-111.

critique. Closely associated with Demau, the Roman group of *Rivolta Femminile* [Female Revolt] the Trento group *Cerchio Spezzato* [Broken circle] and later the *Diotima* group in Verona worked mostly on practices of consciousness-raising (*autocoscienza*) and had fruitful exchanges with French psychoanalysis. As a rough categorization I would gather all these collectives under the label “self-awareness area.”¹¹⁵

In addition to the Catholic field, and the official communist organization UDI, *Unione Donne Italiane* [Italian Women Union], the other main center of Italian neo-feminism was *Lotta Femminista* [Feminist Struggle] known also as the Wages for Housework Movement. Originating between Padua and Ferrara, the group was active in Veneto and Emilia regions, but it also had closed relationships with a Milanese collective, *Liberazione Femminile*, [Female Liberation] and established another important centre in Rome.¹¹⁶ Most of their militants had formed their political experience in the Italian New Left. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, and

¹¹⁵ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “La porta dell’orto e del giardino,” *Generation online*, 1-2 June 2002, <<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdallacosta.htm>>. The other distinguishing element was the elaboration of an “autonomous transcendence” of women as subjects and a clear essentialist philosophical stance, *Non credere di avere diritti* (Torino: Rosenberg & Seller, 1987) 27-30, now translated into English as *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social Symbolic Practice*, Teresa de Lauretis ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); see also *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice. Equality and Sexual Difference*, Graziella Parati and Rebecca West eds., (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002). On the heterogeneity of feminisms see Eda Guerra, “Femminismo/femminismi: appunti per una storia da scrivere,” *Genesis* 3 (2004): 87-111; on Demau see Anna Rita Calabrò and Laura Grasso, eds., *Dal Movimento Femminista al Femminismo Diffuso* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1985), 39-40; on Rivolta Femminile see the manifesto wrote by Carla Lonzi, now in *Sputiamo su Hegel, la donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1977); on the geographical origin of the groups see Frabotta, ed., *Femminismo*, 12; *Il movimento femminista degli anni '70* (Torino: Rosenberg & Seller, 1987); for a general contextualization of Italian neo-feminism see Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, Introduction, *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 5-20.

¹¹⁶ On the catholic movement see Tiziana Noce, “La militanza politica delle cattoliche. Appunti per una ricerca,” Fiamma Lussana and Giacomo Marramao, eds., *L'Italia Repubblicana nella crisi degli anni settanta. Culture, nuovi soggetti, identità*, vol. 2, (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2003); on UDI see Ravera, *Breve storia*, 174, Birnbaum, 55- 64; Biancamaria Frabotta, ed., *La politica del femminismo (1973-76)* (Roma: Savelli, 1978), 191-214; Caterina Liotti, Rosangela Pesenti, Angela Remaggi, and Delfina Tromboni, eds., *Volevamo cambiare il mondo* (Roma: Carocci, 2002); on the birth of Lotta Femminista see Giachetti, 136; Frabotta, ed., *La politica del femminismo*, 21-24.

Alisa del Re all were important figures in *Potere Operaio* [Worker's Power], and Silvia Federici was active in the Student Movement. *Lotta Femminista* became the national organization with international links (namely the USA) that mobilized women around precise objectives.

As a innovative Marxist Feminist organization, *Lotta Femminista* felt the need to correct Marxism while using its basic tools. As the organization announced in one of their first manifestos, the two key points of the new Marxism of *Lotta Femminista* were: the investigation of “the subordination of non-waged labor to wage-labor that conceals the productivity of housewives” and the praxis of political autonomy as “the positive expression of the level of struggle of women.”¹¹⁷ They directed their first correction towards the concept of emancipation through work. Among the several errors committed by the PCI, *Lotta Femminista* focused on the paradoxical union between two opposing beliefs that the idea of emancipation displayed: utopianism and a rigid, almost cynical reading of Marxism. According to the PCI leadership, the subaltern feminine condition was characterized more by the absence of work (i.e. underdevelopment) than by the exploitation of the capitalist system. The woman lived in a sort of reservoir, an oasis barely touched by capitalist exploitation; she was in brief a kind of colonized subject who had to pass through a capitalist phase to acquire consciousness and liberate herself. Under this abstract scheme of liberation, women would miraculously become an autonomous revolutionary subject through the growth of productive forces. *Lotta Femminista* overturned this utopian reading. Like the colonial subject or the citizen of the Meridione (the south of Italy), they argued that women were not suffering from the “backwardness of the economic relationships,” but that they were rather the “most advanced and contradictory facets of the world imperialist system” which always adopts against marginalized subjects a violent and

¹¹⁷ *Il personale è politico* (Torino: Musloni, 1973), 8-9.

all-embracing power, plundering their resources.¹¹⁸ The PCI missed the structural importance of this form of depredation, believing all too easily that emancipation would take place through progressive adjustments of capitalism itself.

At the same time, the teleology of this process recalls the cynical belief in the forces of capitalist development that characterized the old PSI. This objectivism invalidates the principle of emancipation through work – which hypothetically, could be a practicable way to reach economic independence – because it acknowledges the subject only as a passive element, that is, a function in the scheme of things. “Nobody believes anymore in emancipation through an assembly-line job, or a parceled off red tape employment.” If anything, women “are fully employed and for all their life as housewives.”¹¹⁹ This feminist claim was not a snobbish refusal, since it shed light on basic contradictions of the system of production which the official left could not see because it fell under the curtain of capital’s initiative.

Lotta Femminista embraced instead the basic *workerist* principle that “every discovery of an objective social science can and must be translated in the language of the struggles.”¹²⁰ The translation of this principle had to be made context specific. Within women’s work of reproduction lurked a long-lasting battle and it was here that the negotiation of their subject formation took place. According to this dialectical perspective, reproduction is not simply the locus of subjugation. Precisely because it is

¹¹⁸ Grasso, 35.

¹¹⁹ Cambria, *In principio era Marx*, 81.

¹²⁰ To summarize once again: the struggle of the subaltern subject prompts capitalist reorganizations, for the latter is the hidden motor of transformation, which then becomes the territory of a new cycle of confrontations. Mario Tronti, “The Progressive Era,” *Operai e Capitale*, partial English translation in *Class against Class*, <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/tronti_workers_capital.html>. See also Mario Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal,” Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Italy: Autonomia; Post-Political Politics*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980), 28–35; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 268; for the feminist field see Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972), 29.

the locus of a violent depredation, it is also the territory where the struggle arises. Hence its explosive potential and theoretical import.

The starting point for the group was to investigate the roots of female reduction and submission under the logic of capital. This entailed a concrete change in the approach to the idea of domesticity. By 1970, Louis Althusser had already recognized that the family “intervenes in the reproduction of labour power,” i.e., that “in different modes of production, it is the unit of production and/or the unit of consumption.” But although realizing and laying emphasis that “production is [...] the reproduction of the conditions of production,” Althusser never really took into consideration the role of the women in these processes.¹²¹ In Italy, the PCI followed instead the old communist position stating that the family was “a place of mere consumption or production of use values,” and a “mere realm of reserve labor-power,” and that finally what was performed within the family was only unproductive labor.¹²² *Lotta Femminista* turned this argument around, taking to its logical conclusions what Althusser had stated without taking into account the concrete labor of the subjects involved. Reproduction was not the auxiliary element of production, but rather it was its prerequisite. Reproduction, as the multifaceted activities carried out by women, generates in fact a very special article: labor-power. As I noted, Marx distinguished labor (the concrete activity) from labor-power as “the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being.” Labor-power is not exactly a thing, since “it exists only as

¹²¹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, *Marxists Internet Archive*,

<<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>>.

¹²² Mariarosa Dalla Costa, “La porta dell’orto;” Camilla Ravera called it “mass of manoeuvre,” *Breve storia*, 102; Lenin’s take on domestic labor is however one of the most advanced among the Bolsheviks “his grasp of the workings of capitalist social reproduction enables him to sketch the outlines of a theoretically coherent relationship between sex and class oppression, by means of the concept of democratic rights.” Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the oppression of women: toward a unitary theory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 133. There is one side of this discussion that I will not touch on, but that is equally important for reproduction, that is to say prostitution work. See Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995), 33-45.

a capacity, or power of the living individual.”¹²³ To clarify the point, Marx offers an analogy: “when we speak of capacity for labor, we do not speak of labor, any more than when we speak of capacity for digestion, we speak of digestion. The latter process requires something more than a good stomach.” This “something more” has to be constantly produced and preserved in time, so that once the individual worker is given over to the owner, “the production of labor-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance.”¹²⁴ Here the preposition “*of* himself” is true only in its genitive form, not as a causative preposition. For the work of reproduction that Marx attributes to the male worker is in fact carried out *by* women. It is the women who through their “labor of love” care for the physical and emotional life of the worker.¹²⁵ The work of reproduction is the postulate of that of production.

For the worker and the capitalist, however, the value of the work of reproduction is obscured by the fact that labor-power never appears detached from the actual work. As a precondition to its execution, reproduction remains hidden, buried in the natural element. It appears as something outside commodity production (i.e. exchange value). It is considered natural that babies are born, raised and transformed into industrious workers. Once they have entered the field of production, they are subjected to the direct exploitation of wage work and begin creating value. Production then is established here as something *public*, for it carries a high economic value and is based on wage-labor. On the contrary, the work of reproduction is *private*, related to the sentimental sphere and thus not remunerated, or, as we will see, it is rather based

¹²³ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>>.

¹²⁴ Or as Marx says later “if then his appearance in the market is to be continuous, and the continuous conversion of money into capital assumes this, the seller of labour-power must perpetuate himself,” *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>>.

¹²⁵ See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

on “*non-directly waged reproduction work*.”¹²⁶ Yet, “although reproduction appears as the creation of non-value, it clearly contributes to the creation of value as a crucial, integral part of the capitalist cycle.”¹²⁷ As its prerequisite, reproduction is the condition of possibility for the capitalist realization of profit.

Here the crucial role of women’s double burden emerges fully along with the illusion of emancipating women by pushing them into the factory. Women are exploited *first* as reproducers and then, when working, as producers. Domestic work is not simply an unpaid private performance that women add to their regular job. It is what makes labor possible. Thus the priority of the work of reproduction with respect to production is a sort of *originating* structure that pre-supposes the latter and at the same time accompanies it.

This theoretical discovery provides *Lotta Femminista* with a privileged point of view that surpasses previous feminist analysis, since it allows them to comprehend woman’s positionality right at the intersection of multiple objectifying forces. The political discriminations, the alternating policy toward female work, the reduction of women to nature, to the private dimension of the household—all this was only partially explained by the politicization of the private that the older generation of feminists had established. I say “partially” because the symptoms were to a certain extent already marked out, but the complex sets of causes were still not connected.¹²⁸ The older generation of feminists (like Camilla Ravera) predicated women’s oppression on the basis of a stark social inequality. Thus the battle for more freedom/socialization aimed at politicizing what was considered impolitical. Both domestic work and women’s participation in the collective life had to be organized

¹²⁶ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 15.

¹²⁷ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 8.

¹²⁸ As I noticed for Cambria’s work, in the historiographical field this entails the underestimation of private life and its reduction to mere gossip.

within the larger scheme of the revolution as the ultimate horizon of liberation. In short, women were first proletarian, then a particular sector of the working class suffering from an additional form of oppression.

Yet discovering the origin of female non-value as the motor of capitalist valorization involves a qualitative leap, for it discloses the ground upon which, as labor opposed to capital, an autonomous female subjectivity can organize its project of liberation on a mass scale. For *Lotta Femminista* this new form for female subjectivity was not in fact the task of a few enlightened members of the avant-garde, but involved a horizontal contamination among expropriated subjects. The need to reach a widespread consensus served also the purpose of creating an autonomous and organized social force that could resist the crushing defeats of the past like the age-old issue of the right to vote granted only in 1946, or the expulsion of women from production after World War I that the Socialist party and the union negotiated in order to protect the male workforce. The only chance to fight against the well-known proletarian/male inclination to abandon universal struggle, and seek privilege positions in order “to impose on capital some kind of special treatments” was to form a critical mass that could withstand the challenge.¹²⁹

Obviously the threshold of modern political rights remained a necessary condition, and the fight of previous feminists was a fundamental task. Yet according to this new perspective, female subjectivity now looked like a mass that could be organized on the basis of its labor, intersecting class struggle with the struggle between the sexes. *Lotta Femminista* called this new subject *house workers* [*le operaie della casa*]. As official statistics showed, in the early 1970s house workers constituted

¹²⁹ Giovanni Arrighi, “Marxist Century, American Century. The Making and Remaking of the World Labour Movement,” *New Left Review*, 179 (1990): 63.

more than 8,607.000 people among a population of 53 million citizens.¹³⁰ *Lotta Femminista* set out to study their reproductive cycle as an indirect valorization of capital. They argued that:

The value of labor-power is [...] like that of any other commodity found in relation to the fact that abstract human labor is objectified within it. Thus value is the materialization, the objectification of the abstract human labor incorporated into labor-power during its process of reproduction when it gives life to its own existence as a commodity. If this is taken as true, it becomes possible to compare labor-power with every other commodity, despite the fact that it is produced for its use-value and not for its exchange-value, and its value can therefore be expressed.¹³¹

Reproduction involves a vast series of activities such as: procreation and the satisfaction of the worker material and immaterial (emotional) needs. All these tasks produce use-values (utility) that are consumed by the worker. Through the satisfaction of these needs, the worker reconstitutes (his) labor-power in the present, and through his progeny that of the future. Reproduction produces use-values that are part of capital's valorization. Consequently, reproduction is subjected to the extraction of

¹³⁰ Marcella Gramaglia, "Divorzio, PCI, liberazione della donna" Frabotta, ed., *Femminismo*, 233; for the origin of the term house workers see Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, *Le operaie della casa* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1975).

¹³¹ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 81.

surplus-value.¹³² This is what capital indirectly takes away from the working class, that is, it is capital's primary source of expropriation when profitability shrinks.

Modes of Socialization: the Family

The naturalization of “the content of the relations of production within reproduction,” that are economic in their nature, represents a great victory for capital, because their fulfillment is completely bestowed as a duty on the individual family.¹³³ Everywhere childbearing is held in high regard, but it is ultimately considered as an individual choice, at times even the result of the insatiable sexual desire of irrational creatures. Positing “the whole sphere of reproduction [a]s a natural process” helped obscuring the real battle that capital was fighting over the female.¹³⁴ Leopoldina Fortunati clarifies this point by suggesting that the capitalist family is an environment in which “different subjects involved in reproduction enter into mutual relations apparently as individuals connected by family bonds, but in reality as subjects of different relations of production.”¹³⁵

Whenever human behaviors are assumed to be natural (semi-animal like), one needs to find its social/historical nature, even there where the most private and spiritual elements hold sway as with sexuality, interpersonal relationships and feelings.¹³⁶ For example, the fascist law that ruled abortion as a crime against progeny conceived the generation of life as a sacred act; yet the sacralization of this social process is nothing but the concealment of a sensitive structural element: the production of labor-power. The reclaiming of life's political nature against capitalist society (and the religious institution as its intermediary) is the countermove that

¹³² Reproduction is thus use-value for value, that is, for capital valorization. See Fortunati *The Arcane*, 69-87.

¹³³ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 21.

¹³⁴ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 21.

¹³⁵ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 20.

¹³⁶ See Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 17-25.

discloses the biopolitical configuration of generational processes, i.e. the fact that when life comes under the control of the state, it is not because of its sacredness, but because of its value as labor-power. As Silvia Federici notices

Much of the violence unleashed is directed against women, for in the age of the computer, the conquest of the female body is still a precondition for the accumulation of labor and wealth, as demonstrated by the institutional investment in the development of new reproductive technologies that, more than ever, reduce women to wombs.¹³⁷

This is why it is on the terrain of women and their capacity to reproduce that capital, through the State apparatus, works out its policies of containment or expansion. Capital's accumulation needs labor-power like farmers need seeds for their crops.

The other great advantage that capital has over reproduction is that the extraction of surplus-value happens through a middleman, it is thus indirect. Let us see why. As the notion of surplus-value reveals, salary does not remunerate the entirety of the work-day of the laborer, but only a small portion: the rest is profit. Salary represents the mystified equality between the capitalist and the worker. In the case of house workers, capital does not even provide that partial remuneration. The reproducers of labor-power need to live off the wage of their male worker. Through that wage, the capitalist employs at least two laborers, the worker and his wife. Now there are other forms of indirect salarization of reproduction (services, retirements etc.), but what is important here is that it is the worker who receives the pay check and

¹³⁷ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 17.

then provides to its allotment for the family expenditures.¹³⁸ He thus holds the economic lever of the family and through that, he exercises his authority over the wife and children. It is the “woman’s differential location within social reproduction as a whole” that determines her subordination first to men, and then to capital.¹³⁹ The wife and the children are in fact subjected his command and discipline just like he is under his boss in the factory. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma Jones, maintain with “the non-payment of a wage [...] the figure of the boss is concealed behind that of the husband.” Consequently, “the husband and children, through their loving involvement, their loving blackmail, become the first foreman, the immediate controllers of this labor.”¹⁴⁰

This is how “capital disarranges the tendentiously convergent interests” of the worker and the house worker. Both are exploited subjects, but within the family they are locked into a set of constraining factors that reproduce the “economic and social control of men over women,” a valuable instrument to “preserve capital’s expropriation of women as workforce.”¹⁴¹ This partial form of control over women produces a series of consequences within the family as a union of production. Let us examine the repercussions at the emotional level for their partners and children.

The comrade-in-arms/husband is placed in a particular contradictory situation. He honestly fights capital. He is the motor of class struggle and “he can confront his capitalist boss and impose some limits on his exploitation.”¹⁴² Yet, just as the “male worker [who] is subject[ed] to the authority and discipline of capital, in the family he holds the formal authority, and administers capital’s discipline to the woman and

¹³⁸ Del Re, “Struttura capitalistica,” 12-17.

¹³⁹ Vogel, 128.

¹⁴⁰ Dalla Costa and James, 35.

¹⁴¹ Bimbi, “Sociologia della famiglia e ideologia del ruolo della donna,” *Dentro lo specchio*, 31.

¹⁴² Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 130.

children.”¹⁴³ What he does not realize is that his “authority within the family is not intended as a way of valorizing himself, but of valorizing capital; *it is the real form of the authority exercised by capital over housework*” that is to say over the reproduction of labor-power.¹⁴⁴ Because of this distortion the male worker falls prey of a “double-faced behavior” that an inquiry among militants of the seventies described in detail.¹⁴⁵ Here both PCI-affiliated workers and militants of the New Left who criticized the party’s “mechanist interpretation of reality” seemed to act in similar ways with respect to their companions. The seemingly more advanced position of the leftist militant did not translate indeed into any real concrete change from the attitude of the standard party member. They both asserted a traditional form of control that pushed women away from “the life the husband lives outside the home,” excluding them “from real political activity.” As a consequence even their children tended to direct their affection and admiration “towards the father, requesting from the mother the mere execution of services.”¹⁴⁶

The causes of these regressive behaviors were similar. For the PCI member, it was mostly the paternalist attitude due to the abovementioned belief in the underdevelopment of women, and their secondary function in the class struggle. For the New Left militant, it was certainly the latter, but another cause was the discrepancy between the affirmation of total equality and the difficulty in letting go “the privileges acquired over centuries of male domination,” that is to say the reconversion of women’s new sexual liberties into an advantageous condition for the male.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 140.

¹⁴⁴ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 140.

¹⁴⁵ Grasso, 8.

¹⁴⁶ Grasso, 205-206.

¹⁴⁷ Grasso, 50. This is also another reason for the autonomy of feminism: “men are too compromise in their relationship with women. For that reason only women can define themselves and move on the woman question,” Dalla Costa and James, 33.

As I already mentioned, sexual emancipation in fact tended to be neutralized by the unequal division of power. Within the movement, women were expected to be sexually emancipated, that is to say they were expected to be always available for intercourse within or outside the couple. If they refused they were considered still under the grip of an old morality and thus stigmatized with the old refrain of women's natural regressive predisposition: "the virgin is not marketable" as a girl of the movement writes in a pamphlet of *Lotta Femminista*.¹⁴⁸ But the male contradiction of this presumed egalitarian stance also emerged in those cases when women did enjoy sexual freedom. It was not uncommon that their partners felt threatened and did not accept the open relationship they had previously agreed upon. Instead of liberation, the larger portion of sexual freedoms acquired after 1968, were rapidly channeled into a general process of genitalization, that is to say female sexual intercourse became one more available article that men could use to prove their virility. Notwithstanding how committed these militants were, the vestiges of male domination over women keep on reemerging as powerful and binding as ever.¹⁴⁹ As Maria Luisa Boccia states the movement's rebellion was in fact "ambiguous," since its critique and refusal of patriarchal society was walking together with the male temptation to become a new "oppressor."¹⁵⁰ The reasons for these behaviors seem to go beyond politics and capitalism plunging deep into some primordial cause. It is past time to explore sexuality in its *biological* and presumably a-historical dimension.

¹⁴⁸ Qtd. in Frabotta, *Femminismo*, 211-212. On personal memories of women militants and sexuality among the movement see also Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy, 1968* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 99-100, 144-148.

¹⁴⁹ On the resurgence of male possessiveness see Lara Foletti, "La gelosia sostantivo plurale maschile," *Effe* 3 (1974): 28-31; on the liberalization of sexuality see Herbert Marcuse, *An essay on liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

¹⁵⁰ Maria Luisa Boccia, "Il patriarca, la donna, il giovane. La stagione dei movimenti nella crisi italiana," *L'Italia Repubblicana*, Lussana and Marramao, eds., 260.

Sexuality: the Social Split of Humankind

The biopolitical work of reproduction relies on the personhood of those who carry out this set of activities. Consequently a proper analysis of the biological background must be taken into account. For reasons evident to everyone, this is all the more true in the case of sexual intercourse where *physiology* appears to have a structural value. Now what is the most defining characteristic in the physiological dimension of sexuality across genders?

The first distinction we must draw is not one between genders, but between species, that is, between the animal and the human. As Mina Davis Caulfield noted, “almost all our living relatives” show “physiological cues, triggers to arousal for both females and males that effectively limit sexual behavior to the periods of maximal probability for impregnation.”¹⁵¹ Humans instead do not experience a specific sexual season and copulate independently from natural cycles. The loss of a sexual season, that is, the *loss of estrous* cycles where female and male respond to sexual cues, is the result of the evolutionary change occurred in the transition from ape to man. Now this is a tricky subject, since a whole set of repercussions proceeds from this assumption and constitute the foundations of what was is commonly known as sociobiology. Donna Haraway has demonstrated how historically this discipline “has been central in the development of the most through naturalization of patriarchal division of authority in the body politic and in reduction of the body politic to sexual physiology.”¹⁵² Arguments justifying man’s promiscuity and woman’s monogamy based on evolutionary patterns and adaptive choice are still widespread today. Yet it is not

¹⁵¹ Mina Davis Caulfield, “Sexuality in Human Evolution: What is Natural in Sex?” *Feminist Studies* 2 (1985): 344-345.

¹⁵² Donna Haraway, “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part I: A Political Physiology of Dominance,” *Signs* 1 (1978), 26. See also the second part of the article “Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part II: The Past Is the Contested Zone: Human Nature and Theories of Production and Reproduction in Primate,” *Signs*, vol. 2, 1 (1978), 37-60.

within the scope of my work to dwell in such reductionist setbacks. What interests me here is exploring this primordial element of sexual difference in light of our argument regarding labor-power and reproduction.

Silvia Vegetti Finzi, psychologist and militant in the Italian women's movement, stated that the woman is in fact a "domesticated animal" (the absence of estrous is usually a characteristic that mammals in captivity develop). Furthermore, for a woman "the loss of estrous does not simply imply asynchrony with respect to natural cycles [...] but also estrangement with respect to her own body and desire."¹⁵³ If for men the consequences of this primary alienation seem straightforward: detachment from procreative ends creates the conditions for a socio-symbolic experience of sexuality, for women the matter is more complex. Women's sexuality is still molded by reproductive processes, but since she simultaneously engages in non-procreative intercourses it is also directed toward a non-specified goal. This goal is a point of great disagreement. If this goal is defined as the taking care of herself and her progeny, i.e. as sexual favors in exchange for protection, one ends up in a social Darwinism upholding an implicit patriarchal view of society. If it is defined as an autonomous and liberating enjoinder, a feminist call for authenticity usually is at stake. Is this ambiguity between sexuality as women's self-determination (protection, pleasure) and contemporaneously as their over-determination (procreation) the genuine difference between men and women? Is this what disavows any notion of class struggle in favor of a-historical gender conflict? However, didn't we argue that the emphasis on the natural in the realm of reproduction was an index of patriarchal thought?

Clues about this question can be found in the work of Slavoj Žižek. The Slovenian philosopher argues that at the bottom of Lacan's formulas of sexuation, that

¹⁵³ Silvia Vegetti Finzi, "L'animale femminile," *Verso il luogo delle origini*, Centro Documentazione Donna di Firenze, ed., (Milano: La Tartaruga edizioni, 1992), 56.

is to say at the core of the positions the subject assumes with respect to sexuality, resides the problem of the primary difference that is implicit in the loss and/or lack of estrous. Lacan's inquiry investigates in fact the passage "from animal coupling led by instinctual knowledge, regulated by natural rhythms, to human sexuality possessed by an eternalized desire" qua the emergence of the symbolic order.¹⁵⁴ This transformation cannot be articulated through a linear causal transformation. It is a derangement, a rift that breaks an established pattern. As with natural selection, this radical split illustrates the typical paradox of necessity. Necessity is always retrospective. At a certain point in time, something new has emerged. Yet this emerging contains two paradoxical characteristics: it *must be thought* as something that it did not exist before and simultaneously as something that was already posited and necessary for existence. This is the true non-teleological ratio of Darwin's evolutionism: "contingent and meaningless genetic changes are retroactively used [...] in a manner appropriate for survival," thus "temporality here is future anterior, that is, adaptation is something that always and by definition will have been."¹⁵⁵

The extinction of a regulated, overdetermined sexuality qua reproduction becomes a *lack*, a gap that transitions humankind into a new territory. This lack, however, should never be thought as a limitation but as an absence that gives rise to a new openness. For instance, the unhooking of the sexual act from its biological base opens up a great deal of non-reproductive practices that fuel "the development of shared and learned behavior and symbolic communication."¹⁵⁶ In this new field *both* genders inhabit their biological base in a more reflective way. "Sexual pleasure – for instance – which originally signaled that the goal of procreation was achieved,

¹⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: continuum, 2006), 73.

¹⁵⁵ Žižek, 99; this is also what John Bellamy Foster calls Marx's logic of emergence of Darwinism, see *Marx's Ecology. Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 230-236.

¹⁵⁶ Caulfield, 353.

becomes an aim-in-itself.”¹⁵⁷ Detached from rigid natural patterns, sensuous pleasure is now invested with a whole set of meanings and values becoming the object of social negotiations. Sexuality is thus already on the human side of the rift. Its biological base is thoroughly complicated, traversed by social constructions and symbolizations. It is what psychoanalysis calls the symbolic order, which is grafted on the biological as a “kind of heterogeneous parasite that derails the natural rhythm of coupling.”¹⁵⁸

I believe that this is the most natural element we can capture at the bottom of sexuality: the *grafting* on the biological base of sexuality as a social complex. It would be pointless to look for something more natural in the institution of sexuality apart from this grafting which retrospectively bears witness to its necessity. It is the self-positing work of humankind that in relation with (i.e. influencing and responding to) a complex and fluctuating environment experiences morphological changes. To quote again Engels famous saying “the hand is not only the organ of labor, it is also the product of labor.”¹⁵⁹ Morphology is self-causing. Sexuality is part of this set of self-transformative activities in dialectical relation with environs.

Any archaic animal residue still informing women’s sexuality bears testimony to concrete historical arrangements. In a society where reproduction is crucial and those who perform that job are powerless, the pseudo-natural pressure of sexuality as procreation will hold sway. So the specific positions that males and females assume

¹⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 141.

¹⁵⁸ Žižek, 73-74. Following Lacan, Žižek obviously defines different gender positions with respect to the symbolic order. The feminine is limitless, but at the same time not totalizable (not-all), the masculine instead is universal and definite but founded on exception (phallocentrism). Žižek, moreover, argues that for both genders this symbolic detachment does not simply prompts a reflexive supplement, but rather it crops out a limited element elevating it to an absolute condition. This is what he calls “humanization at its zero-level” that is, “the elevation of a minor activity into an end-in-itself,” that has the same features of “jouissance” as the “deadly excess of enjoyment as the goal in itself.” Symbolic communication emerges out of this background. See Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies*, 142-143.

¹⁵⁹ Frederick Engels, *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, ed. Clemens Dutt, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm>>.

with regard to sexuality with its different goals (pleasure and procreation) and the scrutiny of their imbalances follows the path of exploitation.¹⁶⁰ Avoiding a determinist reductionism as well as a relativist form of constructivism, I believe the real task here is to explore and unmask the biopolitical work of reproduction (which involves much more than sexuality *qua* procreation) and its consequences in the historically changing context of a society.

To jump back to our inquiry, as to its objective social condition, in the context of Italian modernization, the male working class was not immediately progressive with respect to sexuality. And within the unit of production and consumption, the family, different subject positions created contradictions and conflicts. It is once again the nature of labor the key to understand how individuals, men, women and their children, are socialized and simultaneously fight these forms of socialization.

Emotional Conflicts: Mothers and Daughters

With May 1968 women's positionality produces, for instance, a series of contradictions and conflicts between the mother and her children, especially with the daughter exposed to the feminist discourse who is rapidly becoming self-conscious and at war with the system of oppression/exploitation that surrounds her. The mother is the first figure against whom the daughter had to rebel. Some feminists believed they could fashion a new self out of this total rupture, but the idea of a "feminism born out of the desert" of previous forms of struggle was not only unjust, it was also dangerous from a theoretical point of view, since it lead directly toward a "voluntaristic" approach to the definition of a new subjectivity.¹⁶¹ Only an approach

¹⁶⁰ The asymmetries between masculine and feminine sexuality have been articulated in several ways: as a metaphysical difference (see for instance the feminism of the so-called self-awareness area), as an ontological-epistemological difference (the Lacanian school of Žižek), as a socially constructed one (mostly North-American feminism). I followed a route that explains discrepancies not as a priori, but rather as concrete instances in the context of social development.

¹⁶¹ Bimbi, "Sociologia della famiglia," 48.

that took into account reproduction as the terrain of capital expropriation could reconstruct a genealogy of conflict and a collective history of struggle. Upon a closer look, the daughter “interiorizes the mother” as the ambivalent representant “of an expropriated and repressed subject, who in turn represses and controls her.”¹⁶² The mother’s socialization thus represents an early training for the daughter, as the latter usually takes part in house chores from very early on, while on the contrary male children are usually exempted from it. Consequently, the daughter turns against her on account of new social needs and aspirations of freedom.

Yet mother and daughters are both expressing different points of insubordination against the family as the subjects of capitalist exploitation. Part of the mother’s space for revolt is represented precisely by the daughter as a component of the sphere of domestic relationships that constitutes the work of reproduction. This seditious act is paid by the daughter in terms of emotional lack that, for the mother, represents instead a small victory in terms of less time spent to work. The daughter, for her part, rebels against the authoritarian imposition of her future role as unpaid laborer in the reproductive field, and clashes directly with the mother as the first representative of such discipline. These are stark material contradictions that on the surface look like dysfunctional behaviors, and were later justified by an easy sociologism under the label “generational conflicts.”

It is important to understand the proper material ground of these conflicts in order to assume their potentiality of rebellion as a new affirmative territory. Provided that mother and daughter avoid the “absolutization” of the respective “alternative identities,” their strife could become “the base for their re-composition insofar as, by affirming their own exigencies, they acquire the instruments to negate each other as

¹⁶² Bimbi, “Sociologia della famiglia,” 51.

subject of present and future expropriated labor.”¹⁶³ Both subjects not only suffer from capitalist expropriation, but they express and increase their level of power through the *negation* of the former. Here arises the possibility for solidarity between two subordinated subjects who can share a narrative of female resistance. The task is arduous, for the fight against the immediate operator of the induction of labor undoubtedly represented the quickest and spontaneous answer. Yet by the mid-1970s some feminists choose to recuperate the lost threads of this continuity. Consciousness-rising meetings became one of the most effective methods to investigate these conflicts and employ their contents of freedom as productive elements. Aware that psychoanalysis in itself was a discipline which carried the hallmarks of power and hierarchy, these meetings tried instead to understand the particular knowledge that every illness carries. They circulate knowledge of these conflicts, avoiding the usual institutionalization that the figure of the psychoanalyst, from his or her position of power, produces.¹⁶⁴ Several other workshops began collecting oral accounts about women’s participation during the Resistance, as well as their experience in factories and as farmers. Even traditional rural figures such as the tireless peasant mothers of Emilia Romagna were re-evaluated as an example of strength and power in light of the present.¹⁶⁵

This said, what happens in the relationship with men? At this point it is clear that a man’s rule over the rest of the family is a consequence of his position of power. His authority is simply the reverberation of capital’s command over labor-power in general. Thus the male worker, as “capital’s representative within the family, is not

¹⁶³ Bimbi, “Sociologia della famiglia,” 52.

¹⁶⁴ My analysis does not take into account consciousness rising practice that was one of the pillar of the Milanese side of neo-feminism. On consciousness rising see Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile. La pratica dell'inconscio nel Movimento delle Donne degli anni settanta* (Milano: F. Angeli, 2000).

¹⁶⁵ See Luisa Passerini, *Storia di donne e femministe* (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1991).

simply an overseer, a supervisor of the process. He too is a reproduction worker.”¹⁶⁶
He restores his strength to work for the capitalist and procreates to supply future workforce. It is in his interest to carry his struggle outside the workshop and start seeing society as a whole, as a vast factory feeding on his life.

The economic nature of interpersonal relationships is now fully brought in the foreground. Their character is ultimately oppressive because they function as conveyor of capitalist expropriation. The exchange that takes place between man and women is one marked by this exploitation. They do not exchange services for themselves but for capital. As Fortunati argues “*all family members – even within the “love” of the family – are not protected from but remain subject to capital’s will and discipline.*”¹⁶⁷
Women disclose though a particular form of this subjection, i.e. reproduction, that so far men had discovered only in the realm of production.

It is now necessary to examine the specificity of capital expropriation of women’s work of reproduction and the full articulation of its structure in terms of extraction of value. Women’s oppression unearths the kind of exploitation we all suffer, an exploitation that is based on a biopolitical ground. This will enable us to explain more effectively the historical transformations of the work of reproduction that led to our present condition as well as the solutions that *Lotta Femminista* imagined for the liberation of house workers.

4.4 The Extraction of Absolute Surplus-Value

Gramsci understood that Fordism was a reaction to the increasingly smaller margins of profits caused by the previous cycle of revolutions. Only an increase in the extraction of relative surplus-value, resulting from the shortening of the labor-time

¹⁶⁶ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 140-141.

¹⁶⁷ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 126.

socially necessary to produce a commodity, would have prevented the gradual fall of the general rate of profit. As I noted previously, capital's organizational answer was the introduction of *scientific management* (together with the expropriation of worker's knowledge and the intensification of the rhythms of production), and a series of *services* that would make up for workers' extra work.¹⁶⁸

What Gramsci did not consider was the use of an enormous, subterranean supply of an "older" form of extraction of value: the imposition of longer periods of working time that constituted the always stretchable line of domestic work. The (usually violent) imposition of more labor time (*surplus-labor*), Marx says, produces *absolute surplus-value* which is typical of the initial phase of accumulation, where the basic conditions of capitalism have to be developed. This form of accumulation, Marx calls it in German: *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*. I agree with those who believe it is better to translate Marx's German term with *primary accumulation*, rather than the customary "primitive" which relegates the process to a definite remote past. Primary, or originary, accumulation has not a chronological, but rather a logical priority "indicating a precondition for the existence of capitalist relations as much as a specific event in time."¹⁶⁹

During primary accumulation, Marx argues that capital operates a *formal subsumption* of labor, since this process "is distinguished only *formally* from other modes of production." It does not involve any real technical advancement but rather a compulsion "to work more than the necessary labor time," for the profit made thanks to the excess of work not paid by the capitalist comes from the lengthening of the

¹⁶⁸ Mario Tronti, "The Progressive Era," *Class Against Class*, <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/tronti_workers_capital.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 63; see also Massimo De Angelis, "Marx and Primitive Accumulation. The Continuous Character of Capital's Enclosures," *The Commoner*, 2 Sept. 2001, <<http://www.commoner.org.uk/02deangelis.pdf>>.

hours of work.¹⁷⁰ Unpaid domestic work (reproduction) is thus an example of the pure extraction of absolute surplus-value: minimal technical advancements, a never ending capacity that makes the laborer dependent on the interminable continuation of that toil... *Surplus-labor* is thus intrinsically *feminine*.¹⁷¹

There are clear physiological consequences of surplus-labor. The compulsion to work more informs the typical form of female abnegation. Her early training in personal sacrifice works out a kind of very “productive passivity.” She “becomes productive inasmuch as the complete denial of her personal autonomy forces her frustration in a series of continuous needs centered in the home, a kind of compulsive perfectionism in her housework.”¹⁷² This perfectionism knows no time, no quantitative goal. Instead it is a constant activity that feeds on itself, since its fulfillment seizes upon the drive to work more.

Technology here deserves close attention. Especially during the economic boom, the production of progressively more sophisticated household appliances became one of the most profitable sectors of the Italian economy. Its application within the economy of the house changed housewives’ labor, making it less burdensome in terms of time and fatigue. Some militants of *Lotta Femminista* saw technology’s role as strategic; it was not liberating in itself but it could be used to free more time from work.¹⁷³ For others instead, technology still followed the movement of capitalist reorganization. Modern domestic appliances, with their design and high degree of science stored in their mechanics, produced the image of the “household as the sphere of free creativity and relaxation,” and thus neutralized the struggle for

¹⁷⁰ Marx, *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*, ed. Ben Fowkes, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch37.htm>>. Formal subsumption is distinguished from real subsumption which involves the extraction of relative surplus-value.

¹⁷¹ See Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 113-123; Cambria, *In principio era Marx*, 78-80; Del Re, “Struttura capitalistica,” 12-17.

¹⁷² Dalla Costa and James, 42.

¹⁷³ See Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 113-123.

“economic independence of women.”¹⁷⁴ While on the one hand, the technologization of domestic work served as a viable tool to reinstate a regressive form of subjectivity (a sophisticated version of the guardian angel of the household), some feminists like Fortunati saw in it instead as a new potential territory for freedom. Now *Lotta Femminista* in general did not support the technologization of housework as a goal, for it always criticized the various forms of objectivist ideologies that represented mechanization as an inherently progressive element. At the same time, the movement was never afraid to appropriate whatever it could from capital.

Still in a proper reading of reproduction *qua* extraction of surplus-labor, if it is true that technology actually entails less physical fatigue, the same cannot be said about labor-time. To the extent that reproduction is a work performed with no ratio between hours of labor and compensation, technological achievement does indeed free more time for *other* domestic activities. The woman’s “working day is unending, not because she has no machines, but because she is isolated.”¹⁷⁵ The whole issue needs in fact to be turned upside down. It is not technological progress that determines spaces of freedom, but the subjective intentionality that informs the former, the fact that women had been carrying a long battle to reduce their working time. Against a totalizing use of their life, of their feelings directed at creating the conditions for a good work for the husband, women got pregnant, cooked and clean less, and less. These were daily acts of insubordination, of individual refusal that grew steadily. This complex of new habits and mentality, not the dishwasher, pushed women to use their time for a more profound socialization, for consciousness-raising meetings, and for the sharing and circulation of knowledge and ideas among themselves.

¹⁷⁴ Bimbi, “Sociologia della famiglia,” 17.

¹⁷⁵ Dalla Costa and James, 29.

With this being said let us turn back to the unifying field for women's subjectivity: the extraction of surplus-labor and capital's *formal subsumption* of labor. As *Lotta Femminista* understood, this presumably older process persisted also at the core of capitalist society and not only at its margins, or in the territories that still had to be subsumed under capitalist modes of production (the so called "developing countries"). This flexible way of operating explains the rapid and apparently contradictory changes of state economic policies toward women during the rise of Italy as a modern capitalist country. Capitalism has in fact at its disposal a "reservoir of potential "exceptions" [...] that can be activated at any stage [...] when the ordinary functioning of labor market appears to be interrupted."¹⁷⁶ The non-linearity of capital's development (and thus the intrinsic weakness of a vision of economic and social advancements) is fully displayed by the history of women's subjectivity. She represents in fact one of the most prominent subjects that capital has surreptitiously used and robbed to fuel growth, while publicly attributing this growth to the prodigies of the productive forces. Contrary to capital's demystification, reproduction embodies the necessary persistence of the non-contemporaneous, or those pockets of exception that found the very possibility of the system.¹⁷⁷

For *Lotta Femminista* militants the puzzle of women's oppression is clear. This is the recapitulation of the history of the feminine work during the slow process of the Italian modernization beginning with the introduction of large-scale industry.

In this phase, the increase productivity of labor within the process of production goes ahead in such a way as to

¹⁷⁶ Sandro Mezzadra, "Living in transition. Toward a heterolingual theory of the Multitude," *Translate.eipcp.net*, <<http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/1107/mezzadra/en>>. Capitalism in fact "subsumes within itself a wide range of relations of productions [...] that could look untypical for its historically determined modes of production," Del Re, "Struttura capitalistica," 11.

¹⁷⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

swallow up the working day of the other process, a day reduced to the basic minimum, seriously damaging its production. [...] Here capital's avidity for surplus-labor not only reduces the necessary work time of reproduction to that work time necessary for the reproduction of the means of subsistence, *it also usurps the woman – the prime work subject of reproduction* – by forcing her to come into the factory as a worker, thus *almost completely excluding any possibility of exploiting her as a capacity for reproduction*.¹⁷⁸

The period of large-scale industry coincides with the high employment rates of the end of the eighteenth Century, and with a general absence of state intervention on the work of reproduction. "Craft and manufacturing, as concomitant modes of production of agriculture" did not aim at regulating reproduction.¹⁷⁹ Here women were free with respect to their access to work and thus less subjected to the patriarchal order typical of an agricultural based family. In 1876, for instance, the silk industry was using a workforce made up for 90% of women and children. Capital gladly employed them because they constituted cheap and relatively unskilled labor. What was needed from them was their direct contribution to production. Therefore, the work of reproduction became secondary to the point that it fell outside capital's immediate range of action. This more egalitarian policy towards women's labor entailed a subsumption under production to the detriment of the work of reproduction that, although reduced, was still performed without any remuneration. When Italian industrialization assumed a

¹⁷⁸ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 163-164.

¹⁷⁹ Del Re, "Struttura capitalistica," 19; see also Perini, 237.

more modern character and labor-power became more important, capital through the state began to extend its control over reproduction. Hence the restriction to work, the pressure to increase birthrates and the first measures to ensure minimal care, which later resulted in the paroxysm of fascism and regulation of procreation and reproduction in general.

With the final modernization of Italy during the reconstruction and the economic boom, the value of labor-power rises to a new level. The proletarian family is the unit that sustains production but through consumption becomes also the main agent that uses up what has been manufactured. In order to function properly, the new labor-power needs to acquire habits and expertise that are more sophisticated and characterized by a unique cultural quality. Reproduction acquires a strategic role. It is in the interest of capital to orient and safeguard procreation and the family. The State carries on this task. Prohibition is crucial: Women must procreate. Consequently abortion is prohibited and modern contraception is resisted: until 1971 the pill was forbidden as it was still considered a crime against the race.

In 1950, thanks to the groundwork laid by Teresa Noce (a combative militant from Turin who held important offices in the communist party after the war), the PCI pressed the government to pass a law that banned the firing of pregnant women and secured 80% of the salary for the whole first year of life of the child.¹⁸⁰ These institutional safeguards were of course not immediately beneficial to capital, for they subtracted resources and redistributed them via services. Ultimately though, the network of institutions and laws that aimed at protecting life performed a double task: the safety of life, and the disciplining of reproduction. Industry needed docile workers who had to be raised and educated. The family was the first phase of this training. After came the school and then, once in the factory, a whole set of services that kept

¹⁸⁰ See CGIL, *Una bella vittoria delle donne italiana* (Roma, 1950), see also Teresa Noce, 379-386.

them healthy.¹⁸¹ Thus the welfare state constitutes the ground where reproduction faces its enemy. For women it is the “sign of the socialization of domination, [...] but it is most of all the moment when the exploitation of the work of reproduction becomes social and measurable, hence a possible subject of negotiation.”¹⁸² Gains like the law sponsored by Teresa Noce had to be fought for. Once they were achieved, more work had to be done to prevent its institutionalization and bureaucratization. Nepotism, speculations, or authoritarianism could turn the new collective space into self-replicating areas of control and submission. Institutions become the frontline of conflicts.

After World War II, in fact instinctive insubordination consistently challenged the relationship between subordinated groups and the institutions that were in charge of controlling them. Within the family, according to *Lotta Femminista*, the subterranean refusal to carry out the work of reproduction is proven by the fact that “in advanced countries, capital is not able anymore to command women’s optimal birth rates.”¹⁸³ The “falling of the rate of fertility” is not caused by contraception, they argue, but by a drive toward a progressive acquisition of margins of non-labor, which is to say of refusal of work. Contraception is a scientific achievement only insofar as it is the result of proletarian knowledge. Once again, it is the cycle of struggle that determines technological transformations.

¹⁸¹ Althusser called these institutions *Ideological State Apparatuses*; their function operated at the level of “the reproduction of labor power” which “requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order.” See “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>>.

¹⁸² Alisa Del Re, Introduction, *I Rapporti sociali di sesso in Europa (1930-1960). L'impatto delle politiche sociali* (Padova: Cedam, 1991), ix.

¹⁸³ Dalla Costa, *Brutto ciao*, 9.

Instruments of Struggle and Capital's Reorganization

The first revolution of 1920 was directed at gaining worker's control over production. It was a revolution that would give power back to its rightful owners, the producers. The revolution of May 1968 expressed instead the extreme difficulty in subordinating labor to production. Thus if 1920 was the attempt to affirm a positive power over production, 1968 was preeminently a negation of it. As such it involved a reassessment of women's position and identity in the process of the construction of Italy and its modernization. But most urgently it implied a set of concrete answers to this totalizing exploitation. *Lotta Femminista* did not have to look too far away to find the signs of a spontaneous opposition. As Mariarosa Dalla Costa states: "the unreliability of women in the home and out of it has grown rapidly [...] and runs directly against the factory as regimentation organized in time and space, and the social factory as organization of the reproduction of labor-power."¹⁸⁴ For women the immediate objective to put an end to the endless forms of exploitation in turn called for an intransigent refusal to produce under these conditions.

Lotta Femminista articulated this refusal through a strategic request: the acknowledgment of a wage to be given to housewives. As Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox argued, "Wage for Housework means first of all that capital will have to pay for the enormous amount of social services which now they are saving on our backs. But most important, to demand Wages for Housework is *by itself* the refusal to accept our work as a biological destiny, which is an indispensable condition for our struggle against it."¹⁸⁵ The claim for a wage would in fact join together numerous women and constitute a common front based on an immediate and easily understandable objective. Moreover, recognizing the enormous contribution of reproduction would also give

¹⁸⁴ Dalla Costa and James, 22.

¹⁸⁵ Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox, *Counter-planning From the Kitchen; Wages for Work, a Perspective on Capital and the Left* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1973), 11-12. See also Birnbaum, 132-142.

women economic independence that, if acquired through a regular job, would still be burdened by the exploitation of a wage-labor. Rewarding reproduction would also break with the false representation of women's passivity, for their supposedly natural predisposition to perform this occupation – i.e. one of the traditional arguments used by men to legitimize women's submission – would now have to be recognized as a regular employment.¹⁸⁶

The official left seemed to be deaf to these claims. It considered them regressive in their radical demands. If you women want to liberate yourselves from the prison of the house, they seemed to say, why ask money for it? Why not instead simply demand more kindergartens, common cafeterias? This was still the old PCI platform: emancipation through work and the socialization of housework. Among leftist women's organizations these positions enjoyed a wide following. Thus they attacked the wage for housework campaign, arguing that it would actually strengthen the idea of traditional role for women and that a wage would be antithetical to the request for the improvement of a network of social services.¹⁸⁷ As to the first point, there appears to emerge a typical unfairness in evaluating similar claims differently depending upon who poses them. Silvia Federici noted that demanding a wage for labor did not mean wanting to institutionalize its degrading character. As the “expression of the class relation, the wage always has two sides,” the side of capital containment of workers' mobilization, but also “the side of the working class which increasingly is fighting for more money, more power, and less work.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, 24. Salary would also pose the problem of quantifying reproductive labor and thus limit the number of working hours, and finally, given the source of acquired income, women could compete on the labor market without having to devalue themselves in order to find a job. Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, 31-32, 35.

¹⁸⁷ See “Incontro a Napoli con le compagne di Lotta Femminista sul tema: Salario per il lavoro domestico,” *Nel Vento*, May 1973, <<http://www.nelvento.net/archivio/68/femm/napoli.htm>>; Birnbaum, 138-142.

¹⁸⁸ Federici and Cox, 11. As Birnbaum argues this “unpaid household work of women held more resonance in Italy than in other countries because the matter was clearly in consonance with the Italian constitution” which states that “Italy is a democratic republic based on work,” 137.

Yet the ultimate goal was not to reform capitalism, nor was to achieve a more equal redistribution of wealth. Rather economic independence was the first step. The second was to put enormous pressure on the system as a whole in order to make it collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. Together with the workers' struggle, the wage for reproduction demand was directed at smashing the link between labor time and a given compensation, by sparking off an uncontrollable chain reaction of *more money and less work*.¹⁸⁹ Computing the enormous amount of work needed to reproduce labor-power and then to debit it to capital would have dramatically compromised the latter's margin of productivity.

Similar to workerist theory, *Lotta Femminista* believed in a kind of positive apocalypse, or the "opposite of a theory of catastrophe, since the force and creativity of social relations is already immanent, living life."¹⁹⁰ This means that creativity is already at work, but that it only has to be liberated through the undermining of the subjection of labor under capital. Not the equality of the *same* social condition for everyone, but difference as the line of development of each other; for each other and not at the expense of each other.

Moreover, the critique of the idea of woman's emancipation through work led to the reassessment of the PCI's second answer to the problem of reproduction, i.e. the socialization of reproduction that Stalinism had already disproved. The dream of a *total* socialization of reproduction can easily turn into the nightmare of a military discipline: mass state institutions run with bureaucratic zeal. Meanwhile, in the harsh reality of a state where women are still a weak political entity, the few concessions in terms of social services tended to produce ghettos, homologation to a state system of coercion, while still demanding supplementary work by women. *Lotta Femminista's*

¹⁸⁹ Frabotta, ed., *Femminismo*, 105, 119-120; Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, 31.

¹⁹⁰ Ballestrini and Moroni, 455.

answer was instead a “real sociability” that fulfils individual necessities and that supports a social communication at a deep level.¹⁹¹ This real sociability must also break away from the family relations of subordination that constitute the first steps of a life-long training to become docile producers. Finally, it is not far away from Gramsci’s organic idea of a collective life where “human quality is raised and refined to the extent that man can satisfy a greater number of needs and thus make himself independent of them.”¹⁹²

The demand of a wage for house workers and a form of socialization that emphasizes individualities are both options that can be proposed only in a society of abundance, that is to say in a society in which scarcity is not the chief concern, and where the problem is rather what kind of consumption is socially more productive (and not production in itself). At this stage the struggle of subordinated groups pushed forward the development of the forces of production. This new dimension is of course still under the grip of capital, but its powerful mechanism appears now as an old vestige, a stubborn limitation to the real development of the capacities of individuals. The potential for a new human richness – what the *operaisti* called, quoting Marx, “general intellect” – seemed blocked and humiliated by the Fordist iron cage. Neo-feminism captured the birth of this movement, that is, the point where “general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*,” because women were historically the agents of the biopolitical labor of reproducing labor-power.¹⁹³ In other words, they were that subjectivity involved in a form of production using the totality of the individual: the body and the mind in the symbiosis of the immanent task of producing reproduction. This form of labor and laboring literally would come to full

¹⁹¹ Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, 40.

¹⁹² Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 308.

¹⁹³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 7, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm>>; for a discussion of the notion of general intellect see chapter 5.

maturity at the level of production only later, after “the demise of the subsistence economy that had prevailed in pre-capitalist Europe, [when] the unity of production and reproduction which has been typical of all societies based on production-for-use came to an end.”¹⁹⁴

The generation of this potentiality was properly taking place on their own biopolitical territory, that is to say, thanks to their struggle they were adding new qualities to labor-power. As I mentioned already, this “notion of labor-power [can] not be reduced (as it was in the time of Gramsci) to an aggregate of physical and mechanical attributes.”¹⁹⁵ It involves a potentiality that is more virtual as it is attached to immaterial needs and operations. The creation, control and support of this labor-power becomes fully biopolitical, in that life as such, “pure and simple *bios*” begins to “encompass within itself” rising to the level of the “life of the mind.”¹⁹⁶

Neo-feminism here read very early how the formal subsumption of capital in a mutated biopolitical discipline (that is to say of life as the substratum of human potentiality) forecloses total control, as well as the possibility for a total revolution. Some of these militants sensed the dangers of a widening among larger sections of population of the modalities of this integral expropriation. Capital had many weapons at its disposal. Although it was employed frequently and with deadly results, repression was not always seen as the proper solution. One lever was, for instance, prices control. The growing inflation of the 1970s held back the wage for housework struggle. It hit precisely the purchasing power of the proletariat that the movement used to cause the crisis of the system. This in turn provoked a new escalation of the struggle, now neo-feminist resort completely to the *operaist* theory of *refusal to work*. As Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati state “today it is the very refusal of

¹⁹⁴ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 74.

¹⁹⁵ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004), 81.

¹⁹⁶ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 81.

becoming workforce the motor of the process of liberation. Living-time is refused as the container of labor-time and rest directed towards wage.”¹⁹⁷ The refusal to work had strong consequences, especially in the various struggles carried out by women “against the secular domination of men,” this would lead to improvements generally.¹⁹⁸ It also valorized that expansive sociality that women already practiced under a patriarchal domination, what Cambria called in *Despite Gramsci* “staircases and kitchen talks.”¹⁹⁹

Having studied how neo-feminists understood the work of the reproduction of labor-power as the base for production, we can now claim that it was them who properly foresaw the contemporary biopolitical dimension of contemporary labor. But it is also here that we can capture the origin of capitalist answer. In the conclusion of *The Arcane of Reproduction*, Leopoldina Fortunati sums up this concept by describing what happens to reproduction in terms of extraction of value:

The place for the production of absolute surplus-value moved from the factory into the house. It became secondary with respect to production. Within the entire cycle of capital, the passage to the production of relative surplus-value within the factory was accompanied by a corresponding passage to the production of absolute-value within the house.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Silvia Federici and Leopoldina Fortunati, Introduction, *Il grande Calibano. Storia del corpo sociale ribelle nella prima fase del capitale* (Milano: Angeli 1984), 20. The wage campaign for housework was also cleverly exploited by the Christian Democrats who, 1979, put forward a law “to give allowances to the housewife-mother,” thus reinstating the idea of woman as a procreator. Birnbaum, 138.

¹⁹⁸ Bimbi, “Sociologia della famiglia,” 13.

¹⁹⁹ Cambria, *Amore come rivoluzione*, 249.

²⁰⁰ Fortunati, 176.

The structure of exploitation in Fordism is the following: within the factory automation of production increases the extraction of relative surplus-value, within the household the lengthening of work time “that tends to be the same as the woman’s living day” carries on the extraction of surplus-value.²⁰¹ The cycle of struggles ignited by 1968 undermined both processes. Capital’s organizational answer was *to take reproduction out of the house and spread it over the whole social ensemble*. It thus generated processes of extraction of surplus-value that affected the whole social body. 1968 ruled out the paradigm of production as a mechanical and authoritarian form of social cooperation and fought for a new *reproductive* dimension that fostered creativity, affects and, in general, the involvement of the whole human being into the construction and development of modern society. Out of the defeat of that cycle of protests, we inherited a reproductive dimension turned upside-down that resembles the kind of oppression suffered by women. Today, the feminization of work discloses the fact that what *immaterial workers are now carrying out is surplus-labor*.²⁰²

As I noted, the disconnection between the production and reproduction produced the fall of women in a sort of natural realm, that of the kitchen, that of childbirth and so on. Here Fortunati points also out that “within reproduction, the dispersion of female house workers and the atomization of the place of production disperses” their potential union and political force.²⁰³ In the next chapter, I will argue that, with the rise of immaterial production, the multitude, the new proletariat will reach a social unity in the form of a linguistic and communicative cooperation while on the terrain of social relations and conflict it looks just as dispersed and

²⁰¹ Fortunati, 120.

²⁰² I employ the term “feminization” for brevity sake. By feminization I only mean a kind of immaterial labor (thus reproductive) in which forms of oppression and or liberation involve directly the biopolitical substratum of labor-power.

²⁰³ Fortunati, 116.

fragmented.²⁰⁴ Here too the feminization of modern work becomes the paradigm for post-Fordist society and the precarious, atomized condition of workers engaged in immaterial production.

Precariousness is no longer a marginal and provisional characteristic, but it is the general form of the labor relation in a productive, digitalized sphere [...] The word *precariat* generally stands for the area of work which is no longer definable by fixed rules relative to the labor relation, to salary and to the length of the working day.

In this text, Franco Berardi calls immaterial labor “digital slavery” just like neo-feminist described women’s condition as a pseudo-servile situation.²⁰⁵ What appears to be formally unified, the global space of social networks, of exchange and consumption of commodities, is built on the material fragmentation of the workforce. Today’s workers are dispersed and atomized through production. By relegating workers to a one-to-one interaction with the machinery, computer technology helped a great deal. The consequences in terms of power are formidable. Consider the similarity with one of the elements of exploitation displayed by women’s work of reproduction in the 1970s: “while no owner would ever dream of making his worker pay rent for his work station, they made us [women] pay the rent of our work place, because our work has never been seen as a job.”²⁰⁶ Hence the request of debiting accommodation expenses to capital through the wage for housework claim. Today,

²⁰⁴ Franco Berardi, “Info-labor and Precarization,” *Generation-online*, <<http://www.generation-online.org/t/tinfolabour.htm>>.

²⁰⁵ Franco Berardi, “Info-labor and Precarization.”

²⁰⁶ Collettivo Internazionale Femminista, 47.

instead, it is not uncommon for some call centers in Italy to charge the worker for the rent of his or her work station.²⁰⁷ The worker is exploited also, and in a direct form, at the level of fix capital, i.e. the instruments of production which the capitalist normally buys with surplus-value.

What is formally unified at the level of social relations is denied at the material level of production. We are all involved in the processes of the global market but only as consumers, never as workforce. This also resembles women's condition, for their task of regenerating labor-power was highly praised at a social level, but it disappeared as *work*, and thus as exploitation, at a material level. The regeneration of labor-power was mystified as something private and natural. Today too with the hegemony of reproduction as a mode of production, the *natural* comes to the foreground. Yet the impact of reproduction *qua* surplus-labor produces distortions that must be clearly laid out and stripped off their claim of being natural. The link between time and labor is one of them.

When we move onto the sphere of info-labor [immaterial labor] there is no longer a need to have bought over a person for eight hours a day indefinitely. Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers. De-personalized time has become the real agent of the process of valorization, and de-personalized time has no rights, nor any demands either. It can only be either available or unavailable, but the alternative is purely theoretical because the physical body, despite not being a legally

²⁰⁷ See Antonio Sciotto, "Io, Sara, cestinata da Atesia e 1288," *Ilmanifesto*, 29 Aug. 2006.

recognized person, still has to buy his food and pay his rent.²⁰⁸

The colonization of the totality of non-labor time is very subtle. “The cycle of production comes into operation when it is required by the capitalist,” consequently the intellectual worker must seize the opportunity when it comes around.²⁰⁹ At the same time though, he or she must fill in the discontinuousness of labor through a permanent job hunt and an endless process of self-investment to improve his or her marketability. The apparent freedom of choice is certainly less coercive than in the case of women, where social pressure to marry and reproduce was certainly superior, but the material needs of the immaterial workers are no less pressing. They are natural, what is *not* natural, but socially imposed by capital, is the toxic levels of surplus-labor they have to endure to survive. Again here what is urgent is, in the best feminist tradition, to raise awareness of the fact that surplus-labor is not a natural condition, but a social one. In other words, we must fight the idea that is fair and rightful for capital to remunerate immaterial labor just for the limited time of the work’s execution, while dumping on the workers the costs of training and of the work of reproduction.

Women’s refusal to carry out domestic work had some impact on our social setting. The de-naturalization of domestic work as woman activity set in motion a renegotiation of identity roles that today appears as progress. Over the last few decades, capital became much more generous in linking gender to fixed social roles, not only because of women’s struggles, but also because capital linked sexual identity less tightly to the work of reproduction. Thus capital “has attempted to recuperate and compensate for women’s lower levels of housework by recreating the formal image of

²⁰⁸ Franco Berardi, “Info-labor and Precarization.”

²⁰⁹ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” *Generation-online*, 2 April 2009, <<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>>.

paternity and marriage, presenting it as a new world for men from which they were once excluded but are now free to enter.”²¹⁰ The fact that a larger portion of reproductive work is now carried out by men has certainly immediate positive consequences on women, but the fact that this labor bears the mark of unrecognized surplus-labor is a defeat for all. Behind the praise for the social advancements of a modern democracy lurks a subterranean exploitation that has no name. Neo-feminism disclosed it, but the large majority of today’s society seems to be oblivious and cannot even imagine debiting reproduction to capital.

The stress on individuality, on the flexibility of production in terms of time and space, on a certain creative quality of immaterial work, and the centrality of sociability that was unknown to the mechanical production of the Fordist factory--all these features, which are common to today’s production, were instruments to attack the subordination of labor and incorporated it under its new restructuring. The biopolitical vitality of these social dynamics of production was bent toward a more intense productivity, while larger zones of society were submitted to a new phase of formal subsumption of labor. Only today do we see the full realization of surplus-labor as a structural element of production within advanced capitalist societies. With this comes the conviction that another discovery of neo-feminism is proven right. What we experience today is a new process of primary accumulation as the expropriation of the very personhood of individuals.

Having laid out this set of problems, I turn now to the concept of the multitude as it emerged in recent years in the work of Antonio Negri. According to Negri, the multitude is the class-based subject that is progressively liberating humankind from capital’s oppression. My argument instead is that the multitude of intellectual laborers is a much more duplicitous subject than Negri admits. Following these last remarks,

²¹⁰ Fortunati, *The Arcane*, 132.

the neo-feminist analysis of reproduction and Pasolini's insight on consumer society and ecology, I attempt to articulate a notion of the multitude which heightens the potentials for liberation in opposition to the elements of oppression that I delineated so far.

CHAPTER 5

A BIOPOLITICAL MULTITUDE AND ITS PLANET: ANTONIO NEGRI AND PAOLO VIRNO

Sovietism, the demand for direct democracy and the re-appropriation of administration, the seizing of power through a radical democracy--all these are the last utopias of socialism. When, however, the proletarian subject becomes immaterial, intellectual, social and cooperative, it is not necessary to construct communism anymore, but rather to "constitute" or "express it."

(T. Negri, *Quell'intelligente moltitudine*)

5.1 A Movement of Movements: a Biopolitical Subject Going Global

Multitudo, Imperium, Omnia sunt communia... when the Anti-Globalization Movement took its first steps in Italy, Latin acquired an unexpected celebrity among the new generations who typically were more interested in Italianizing English terms borrowed from computer science than digging into the bookish culture of classical letters. The terms *Multitudo* and *Imperium* became popular through the work of Antonio Negri. Providing an easily comprehensible counter-image for a positive globalization, the slogan *Omnia sunt communia*, all things are communal or “everything belongs to everyone,” did not come from a political treatise but from a novel.¹ I believe that the enthusiasm that the epic tale of the German peasant’s war roused amongst many readers makes the novel *Q* (1999) key for understanding the antagonism of the so-called Anti-Globalization Movement.

Written by a collective author, whose *nome de plum* at the time was Luther Blissett, *Q* is a fictionalized historical account of the wave of Anabaptist uprisings that shook the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth Century Europe. Marching under the slogan “everything is communal,” the peasants organized a massive popular revolt that threatened the temporal power of German princes first, and later would have reverberations during the Counter-Reformation in Italy. The inspiration for the uprising as well as the spiritual leader was a monk, Thomas Müntzer (1488-1525), who turned against Martin Luther because of religious and political reasons. Consider the description in *Q* of the spread of the Anabaptist movement and the organizational practices its followers deploy for the transmission of egalitarian doctrine:

There’s a frenetic coming and going of people [...] a day of
important meetings: a ferment of contacts, dialogues,

¹ Luther Blissett, *Q* (New York: Hartcourt, 2004), 27.

projects announcing new weeks of earthquake and revolution. [...] And then, most important of all, there's the printing press; that stupefying piece of technology which, like a dry and windy forest fire, is spreading by the day, giving us plenty of ideas for ways of sending messages and incitements further and faster to reach the brethren, who have sprung up like mushrooms in every corner of the country.²

Critics have devoted a great deal of time to interpreting the political references for the story, drawing upon comparisons with Italy in 1968 and 1977.³ But for the activist of the Anti-Globalization Movement there was no need to translate the historical fiction into some movement of the past, it was rather the present of his or her militancy. The description of a social network expanding through an innovative use of technology was compared directly, almost literally, to the new ways for socializing the struggle through the internet and audiovisual material. Even from a narrative point of view, the "centrifugal" configuration of the plot followed "the logic of information percolating outwards, like the modern phenomenon of Internet message-strings."⁴ In this *Q* facilitated a direct allegorical reading and produced identification with the themes and the epic force of the Anabaptist struggle which diminished the impact of the temporal gap between the fictional story of the past and the present of the Anti-Globalization protest.

² Blissett, 89.

³ See for instance Franco Bernardi, "The Last Novel of the Twentieth Century," *wumingfoundation*, <<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/rassegna/bifoona.html>>.

⁴ Bharat Tandon, "No Logo Reformation," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 May 2003, now in *wumingfoundation* <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/rassegna/times_literary_supplement.html>.

At the turn of the millennium, a new wave of social unrest was in fact shaking Italian society, one that, inspired by similar egalitarian principles, intensified communication and social cooperation. The intensive and innovative use of the internet and the idea of organizing the movement around networks sprouted almost naturally and found a proper instrument in the so-called *social forums*, popular institutions that organized marches and direct action. In this *Q* captured well the mounting wave of social activism that Italian society was experiencing. The long and adventurous story of *Q* offered an epic model that mirrored on the movement and its creative way of reinventing social confrontation during protest. Knowledge-sharing and increased social unity on a global scale were truly the base and aspiration for the Anti-Globalization Movement, whose international participation hinged on its extraordinary correspondence of objectives and solutions to the problems the world was facing as a whole.⁵ Finally, it is not only the effectiveness of the narrative form, nor the epic élan that makes *Q* organic to the Anti-Globalization Movement. *Q* is in fact the fictionalized account of what Marx had called the process of primary accumulation.⁶ A similar transformation was taking place on a world scale, but simultaneously an equally powerful fight against it was also maturing.

The planetary wave of Anti-Globalization protests produced a remarkable number of documents, most notably visual texts as well as critical analysis of globalization. Because of its extent and the fact that this Movement, in my opinion, is still very much in the making, it would be hard to frame and investigate it historically

⁵ Social Forums were public meetings, resembling 1968 Student assemblies, where various part of civil society discussed activities, direct actions and protests. A distinct emphasis was posed on avoiding forms most deleterious forms of leadership that marked the LC experience and 1968 in general. Social Forums included traditional organization of the left, such as several formations that survived the implosion of the PCI, part of the CGIL, several catholic associations, and the heir of the autonomist area. See Subscriptions to the Genova Social Forum, *Genova Social Forum Website*, <<http://www.processig8.org/GSF/adessioni1.htm>>.

⁶ See chapter 4, 302.

as I did with the Factory Councils and 1968. And this is not my goal. Others have attempted it and I refer the reader to a more comprehensive understanding of what for its planetary extension has been called the *Movement of Movements*.⁷ Here instead I want to tap directly into the heart of this last wave of social unrest via a reading and critique of Antonio Negri's work. The idea of the *multitudo*, or multitude is by far the most renowned conceptualization of the transformation of labor in a regime of post-Fordism. Antonio Negri, along with Michael Hardt, was the first to develop and to connect the idea of the multitude to the biopolitical dimension that labor brought forward from its Fordist beginnings to the present day. I will explore this concept and, in the last part of the chapter, I will also provide a critique of it by drawing on the work of Paolo Virno.

I will pay attention to two elements in particular. First, the twofold nature of biopolitics as the conveyor of processes of prime accumulation and, simultaneously, as the heightening of the potentiality of labor-power. This point refers to the Marxist neo-feminist analysis of the work of reproduction and underscores the fact that the ambiguities of the multitude as a new biopolitical subject complicate its productive potential. Second, I explore ecology as a limit to human development and the role it must play in the struggle of the multitude. Ecology is dramatically absent in Negri's thought. But, as Pasolini sensed long ago, it has such a crucial impact for our society

⁷ Tom Merters, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004); see also Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Juan Ramon Cappella, *Entrada en la barbarie* (Madrid: Trotta Editorial, 2007); William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Magic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997); Justin Rosenberg, *The Follies of Globalization Theory* (London: Verso, 2000); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton Rose and George Katsiaficas, eds., *The battle of Seattle: the new challenge to capitalist globalization* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001). For the Anti-Globalization Movement in Italy see Vittorio Agnoletto, *Prima Persone: le nostre ragioni contro la globalizzazione* (Roma: Laterza, 2003); Giulietto Chiesa, *G8/Genova* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001); Claudio Marradi and Enrico Ratto, eds., *Da Seattle a Genova. Gli 8 non valgono una moltitudine* (Genova: Fratelli Frilli, 2001); Mario Pianta, *Globalizzazione dal basso. Economia mondiale e movimenti sociali* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2001).

that a theory of social change cannot ignore it. To be clear: Pasolini has a methodological value in my argumentation, I am not siding myself with his taste for primitivism. I frame ecology as the relationship between the human and the earth, as a protection from toxic behaviors that degrade both. Ecology does not mean “bordering [...] nature worship” as Negri writes.⁸ Quite on the contrary, by including it as a fundamental element in the way we foresee a new production, we begin to lay the basis for the subversion of capitalism.

Multitude: the Motor of a Positive Crisis

Gramsci and the Factory Councils had envisioned the potentiality of the Fordism operated and invented by the workers. The subject of this mode of production would have probably resembled a mass worker, but reversed. The problem is that we look at it at the end of its transformation and integration, that is to say, at a point when it becomes very difficult to posit the mass worker as something productive or positive. There have been too many mystifications and layers of defeats and compromises dictated by power. Furthermore, the fact that the following generations perceived that image, not only as something irremediably compromised and irretrievable, but also as a tool of oppression, bears witness to the degree of the integration of the figure of the mass worker within the system, and not to its inner possibility of development. The trajectory that Gramsci outlined, first during the insurgence of 1920, then during his detention, was one in which he grasped the processes of the emptying out of human content of labor, abstraction of labor, that industrialism had set in motion long before, and that was pointing towards the supremacy of reproduction as the full deployment of biopolitical capacities. From his cell, Gramsci had vigorously maintained that it was from “those on whom is imposed the burden of creating with their own suffering the

⁸ Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Commons. A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 178.

material bases of the new order” that he expected the discovery of ways of turning “into freedom what today is necessity.”⁹

Thus far, I have attempted to pull out this residue of positivity through the viscous fabric of capitalist stabilization. But the dialectic that these processes of affirmation and negation establish produces layering and superimpositions that make it difficult to crop out clear positive identities. Thus if 1920 was essentially an attack on wage-labor so as on the old means of production, 1968 assaulted Fordism precisely as the (negative) development of the Fordism upheld by the workers.

The development of this historical tragedy, one that Gramsci described as the succession of “incredible acts of brutality,” has its proper tragic heroes.¹⁰ As we have seen in the previous chapter, they are the *mass worker*, the *social worker* and finally the *multitude*. This is the trajectory of the biopolitical transformation that Antonio Negri has sketched in his many years of work and militancy. In *Empire*, he and Michael Hardt call it precisely an ontological tragedy in which “being is produced and reproduced.”¹¹ As we will see, in a very Nietzschean move, it is out of the understanding and affirming of this tragic structure of reality that a final positive affirmation results. For Negri this happens on the terrain of the biopolitical.

The last radical turn in the Italian twentieth Century – the rise at the turn of the millennium of a biopolitical multitude – represents this final affirmative movement. The category of multitude is complex; it will take time for us to define it properly. For now, let’s say that even if Negri found instances of its actualization in several movements around the globe, it does not coincide with the Anti-Globalization movements and its protests. As he argues,

⁹ Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publisher, 2003), 317.

¹⁰ Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, 298.

¹¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 47.

the concept of multitude is not very clear to me, and hence I use it – as well as advise others to use it – with much caution. This is why the current simplifications of this concept make me shiver! I am referring, for example to the way in which the phrase “the multitude against empire” has been appropriated and deployed as a slogan by some anti-globalization movements.¹²

However, in the Italian context, the appropriation of the text *Empire* was overtly ironic and self-critical, and resonated with the sarcasm of the 1977 Movement. If it is true that, during the G8 protest, one could read slogans like the one mentioned above, it is also true that the process of self-identification with the concept of the multitude was always devoid of any claim of fulfilling in practice what Negri could hardly elaborate in theory: there was always a ironic filtering. For instance, a funny sign one could also note stated: “Spinoza and Totti united in the struggle! Hands off the multitude!” Spinoza holds a central role in Negri’s work. Francesco Totti, a famous soccer player for AS Roma, was instead the involuntary protagonist of a clever spoof-ad that circulated since the fall of 2000.¹³ The billboard modification that ridiculed the omnipresent slogans of the leader of the right-wing coalition, Silvio Berlusconi, “less taxes for everybody [*tutti*],” was changed into “less taxes for Totti” in which the name of the soccer player, Totti, punned with everybody [*tutti*]. The linkage of the two

¹² Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, 93. Yet, Negri seems to be more open to such an identification when together with Michael Hardt quotes the slogan of the Anti-Globalization Movement “another world is possible,” *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 348.

¹³ See Concita De Gregorio, “Anno 2000, la satira va su Internet,” *La Repubblica*, 8 Oct. 2001.

disparate elements reflected the creativity and joyful affirmation of the activism of the young protesters.¹⁴

This said, I will argue that the Anti-Globalization Movement represented a historical incarnation of the new biopolitical subjectivity which stands in a more complex relation with the rupture provoked by 1968. Against Negri, I want to argue that these social movements lay claims that do not perfectly match with the intensification of the forms of subjectivity that emerged previously. The Anti-Globalization Movement gladly accepted and employed the definition of the multitude because it captured its social composition as well as the differences that traversed it and its international aspirations. I don't believe it followed Negri's theorization, especially, as we will see, in his notion that the multitude's strength could overcome dialectics. The ecological problem, for instance, was a key dialectical factor in developing an anti-capitalist platform. But before I can do that, I find it useful to follow Negri in his scripting of the ontological drama. This is for two reasons. First the emergence of the concept of the biopolitical in the Italian context must be attributed to his work. Second, it is only through a careful reading of his genealogy of the biopolitical that we can understand our current situation. In so doing, we also bring together the various contributions and ideas that previous social movements elaborated.

The Law of Value and Capital's Crisis

I want to begin my reading of the biopolitical with a seminal work Antonio Negri published in the months of the military repression of 1977. *Domination and Sabotage: On the Marxist Method of Social Transformation* is a remarkable study that

¹⁴ This practice of culture jamming became a widespread phenomenon in Italy as a result of the intensification of the antiglobalization protest. However, collective groups such as Luther Blissett were already active in the nineties. See *Adbusters Rivista di Ecologia Mentale* <<http://www.adbusters.it/pages/database.php>>.

Negri wrote at the dawn of the defeat of the 1977 Movement. Here Negri re-articulates the *operaist* inversion of the autonomy of the worker with respect to capital, in a time of defeat and widespread pessimism. Just a few years before, the antagonism of the working class buttressed the notion of its subjective force in determining the transformation of the relation of production. In a declining phase of this antagonism, Negri set out to explain how that antagonism was going to be re-structured by capitalism and how, from that half-life, a new revolutionary spirit would rise. Capital's readjustment meant a new imposition of the law of value. As Negri explains

The continuing work of *reinforcing the state-form* – that is, of *the imposition of the law of value* (albeit in continuously modified form) as a measure and a synthesis of stabilization and restructuring – had never faltered. When we speak of crisis of the law of value, we must be careful: *the crisis of this law does not at all mean that the law does not operate*; rather, its *form is modified*, transforming it from a law of political economy into a form of state command. [...] The rhythm according to which exploitation must dance, according to which the social mechanism of the reproduction of exploitation must be stabilized, must be dictated by the law of value.¹⁵

¹⁵ Antonio Negri, *Domination and Sabotage. On the Marxist Method of Social Transformation*, now in *Books for Burning: between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (London: Verso, 2005), 233.

The law of value is grounded in the definition of labor *qua* unit of time, that is on what Marx called the “labor time socially necessary” to produce a commodity.¹⁶ As I noted before, this is the site of the exploitation as well as the only means of survival for the worker. It is here that the worker can make demands and bargain for better conditions by increasing the value of his socially necessary labor time. In a reformist perspective this is all he or she can attain. For the Movement this was a lever to undermine the system as a whole. *Operaismo* theorized and practiced the radical autonomy of the working class and the fact that the wage gave the lie to the proper exchange between labor-power and the capitalist. Furthermore, the supremacy of the working class in the transformation of society brought the determination of the socially necessary labor as simply the resultant of political struggle to its logical conclusion. The law of value here takes up the form of a subjective decision, the result of a conflict, and not of abstract schemata or of a quantitative exchange based on a commensurable rationale.

As these relationships became fluid again and under the control (at least to a certain extent) of the workers, capital’s reacted by re-establishing a steady mechanism of control. As Negri remarks “capital has often accepted that the workers’ struggle is the motive force of development.”¹⁷ As a result, capital’s response would be launched on the terrain of the workers. This is what Negri calls “state command,” which thins down the economic and boosts the political lever of power. Thus the law of value comes back in its exploitative dimension as an act of power and of command that draws on several devices other than the direct imposition of the rhythms of exploitation – such as, for instance, “monetary questions” (inflation) or the allocation of public services by the state.¹⁸ As I underscored, the neo-feminist movement had

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>>.

¹⁷ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 232.

¹⁸ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 234, 252-253.

demonstrated how public spending was a part, even if always too small, of the quantification of the value produced by women in the labor of reproduction. Negri recognizes this claim and adds that public spending represents “the imposition of the recognition [of] the unity of social labor” and its new proletarian regime of production.¹⁹ The trend towards dismantling social services was thus a maneuver that aimed at controlling subordinated groups by expropriating indirect and non-monetary remuneration that they had achieved through their fight for better conditions.

Two considerations stem from this point. The redeploying of capital on the workers’ ground, that is to say on the political ground of the capitalist response, does not establish a homology between the two: the capitalist use of power is different from that of the workers. As Negri warns us, assuming this homology implies surrendering to the idea “that the only meaningful linguistic horizon is [the one that] pertain[s] to the structure of capitalist power.”²⁰ Once power is identified with capitalism, the working class loses any foothold for developing its new and radically alternative social order. Power becomes simply a compromise with the enemy or a lesser evil and so on. Still as we will see, Negri theorizes a radical separation of the working class from capital. The proletarian negation of the constituted order is a process of liberation endowed with a force that is powerful insofar as it disintegrates capitalist power. Secondly, Negri talks about the particular form that the capitalist application of the law of value takes; he consistently argues that its command becomes *indifferent*. Consequently, “state restructuring increasingly becomes an indiscriminate succession of acts of control, a precise technical apparatus which has lost all measure, all internal reference points, all coherent internal logic.” It is the new rationale of state command:

¹⁹ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 250.

²⁰ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 235.

“destructured, technical, and repressive.”²¹ What is the link between the fragmented nature of this command and its indifference?

The Dialectics between Capitalist Command and Worker’s Process of Self-valorization

I believe that Negri anticipates an acquisition that would become clear in post-colonial studies, for he shows how the dialectic between struggle and brutal command resembles mechanisms already at work on the terrain of the old colonial powers. If we follow Carl Smith, colonial domination is based on clear-cut political spaces in which subjects carry out conflicts *inter pares*. However, the foundation of their identity grows out of the difference established with the outside, that is, with the non-European. It is an order established on a lack of order, on the nothingness of the outside which produces an absolute border, what Sandro Mezzadra has called a “metaborder.” By this Mezzadra signals the establishment of a spatial distribution of what is considered political and historical and what is not, what is purely barbaric, uncivilized and which can thus be subjected to the most brutal form of dominion.²² Within Europe, conflicts are limited by the *jus publicum aeuropeum*. Outside of it European countries carry out a form of absolute and lawless war. When anti-colonialist movements disaggregate this system of domination, the boundary is dismantled into a “multiplicity of borders,” and the logic that permeated external relations now operates within the old European territories.²³ The state thus begins employing forms of discipline and control that go beyond the law. Violence, for instance, is unleashed and liberated from formal-legal constraints. Violence is not

²¹ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 245.

²² Mezzadra, “Living in Transition,” see also Carlo Galli, *Lo sguardo di Giano. Saggi su Carl Smith* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008).

²³ Mezzadra, “Living in transition. Toward and heterolingual theory of the Multitude,” *Translate.eipcp.net*, Jun. 2007, <<http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/1107/mezzadra/en>>.

established on a set of limits and distinctions, but rather it is condensed in its action *qua* command. It is in short *indifferent*.

We have reached a point where we can clearly understand what Negri meant by the imposition of a new law of value. The new normalization imposed by capital after the long wave of rebellion that started with 1968 takes the form of the radical disrupting of the preceding system of wage-labor. As a reaction to the politicization of the economic relationships carried out by the working force, capital shifts to a strategy of command. Capital rules as a despot, relying not on formal-legal devices but rather on the indifferent *use of force*. Yet the implications of this response are less settled than they might seem. Negri underscores that this move towards a “technique of power” is the result of a *crisis*. Just as for the anti-colonial struggle, it is actually the “*destructuring tension of these struggle (of the workers) [that] has a direct effect on the very rationality of capitalist restructuring, and eliminates this rationality.*”²⁴ What looks like an act of power, Negri discloses instead as a decision that is, on one side, overtly determined by the opponent and, on the other, that is based on the shaky ground of an internal weakness, that is, of a system that has lost its structure of reference.²⁵ Here emerges the radical twist that Negri gives to the common understanding of capitalist normalization of worker’s struggle. From the outset it looks like just another defeat for the workers, but in the end capital’s reaction is subordinated to workers’ doings. Negri too admits the ambiguity of his proposition:

I must, at one and the same time, show how the form of capitalist domination is subordinated to the process of workers’ and proletarian self-valorization – and also show

²⁴ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 245.

²⁵ See Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 246.

the resulting determination in the destructured separateness
of command.²⁶

Self-valorization is the key concept here. What does worker's self-valorization mean? Capital's valorization is clearly the extraction of more surplus-value from the worker and the increase of value of the products through their circulation on the market. But in what sense can Negri talk about worker's valorization? To simplify his complex reflection: self-valorization *is* refusal of work. As the radical negation of capital, the workers can increase the value of his or her activity only if s/he unhooks it from capitalist production; otherwise s/he is simply adding on capital's accumulation. Worker's activity thus will be productive insofar as it increases social cooperation, and not profit. Let's see how Negri reaches this conclusion.

Through a new reading of Marx's most far-reaching work, the *Grundrisse*, Negri extracts from the law of value the real material content of the worker's productive struggle. In line with the assumptions of *operaismo*, Negri points to two distinctive discoveries that Marx made in this late work. The first is found in the so called "Fragment on Machines," in which Marx foresees the qualitative leap of industrial production rising to such a generalized level that "the development of the social individual [...] appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth." The *general intellect*, which Marx writes in English as if to "give emphasis to the expression," reflects precisely this "collective, social character which belongs to intellectual activity when this activity becomes [...] the true mainspring of the production of wealth."²⁷ The social unity of intellectual and scientific knowledge accumulated over centuries, and now serving as the material basis for production,

²⁶ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 247.

²⁷ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2004), 38.

constitutes the groundbreaking novelty of the *general intellect*. When the latter becomes a dominant tendency in society, “labor time ceases and must cease to be” the measure of labor, since the global “necessary labor of society” has been reduced “to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.”²⁸

Operaismo argued that this leap forward was produced precisely by the working class. Now the objective of the struggle was first to defeat the sediments of the law of value which capital is tempted to use “as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created.”²⁹ Furthermore, the working class had to liberate from capitalist control the potentiality of the “general social knowledge” which, Marx maintains, “has become a direct force of production,” positing “social life itself [...] under the control of the general intellect.”³⁰ In this context, the worker’s self-valorization is hypothetically free from capital’s extraction of surplus-value. As we will see, this is not the case in our society.

Marx’s second discovery has to do with the kernel of the revolutionary potential of worker self-valorization contained by *alienation*. Self-valorization here is expressed via a negative formulation, that of alienation. In establishing its condition of possibility, capital posits individuals as wage-earners. Once worker skills and capacities (living-labor) have entered this condition they need to be reproduced as such. This is the work of reproduction carried out by women and cast as something natural outside production. Interestingly enough, Marx seems to point at this

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 7, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm#p704>>.

²⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 7, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm#p704>>.

³⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 7, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch14.htm#p704>>.

characteristic trait of reproduction underscored by neo-feminism, when he argues that in a capitalist society

What is reproduced and produced anew is not only the
presence of these objective conditions of living-labor, *but*
also their presence as independent values, i.e. values
belonging to an alien subject, confronting this living-labor
capacity.³¹

Absorbed in the process of production, the worker is first *estranged* by his or her own production, the machinery s/he operates and the commodities s/he contributes to manufacture. Second, the worker also looks at the life outside the factory as something detached from work, as a private sphere. We saw that this privatization has many consequences. It drags along with it the enslaving of the woman to domesticity, but also provokes the failure of the worker to understand his own fundamental inalienable essence that capital puts to work, i.e. labor-power. As I mentioned above, labor-power, one of the main effects of the work of reproduction, is the ability to work, and not its objectification in the execution of a particular task. Now living-labor, the worker's activity, fulfils its capacity only in practice, but this practice is already alienated and expropriated in the form of wage-labor. As a result, "living-labor itself appears as *alien vis-à-vis* living-labor capacity, whose labor it is, whose own life's expression it is."³²

³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 4, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm#p459>>. The need to present the worker self-valorization via the negative route of alienation comes from what Althusser called "the tenacious obviousness (ideological obviousness of an empiricist type) of the point of view of production alone," which is "so integrated into our everyday 'consciousness' that it is extremely hard, not to say almost impossible, to raise oneself to the *point of view of reproduction*." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>>.

³² Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 4, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm#p459>>.

These multiple forms of alienation pave the way for a radical negation that in fact expresses a liberated form of living-labor. Because of its alienation to work, Marx glosses that “if capital were willing to pay it [work] *without* making it labor, it [living-labor] would enter the bargain with pleasure.”³³ Alienation provokes in the worker the typical refractoriness to work. The secret is to follow this unavailability to its end, as the sign of a positive element: the radical unwillingness to participate in production. For Negri there is no reconciliatory moment that mitigates alienation through the re-appropriation of production, but only refusal and indisposition. Thus the notion of *refusal of work* is born at the intersection of Marx’s discovery of the *general intellect* and his rescuing, through the “most extreme form of alienation,” of the vital expression of the capacity of living-labor.³⁴ The *refusal of work* is simultaneously the refusal to participate into the process of exploitation, but also the heightening of the capacity to work in an interconnected and extensive system of intellectual and social production outside capitalist relations of production. Refusal of work implies a social industriousness that increases circulation and exchanges in a non-exploitative direction. Just like the collective assembling of air balloons in *Boccalone’s* performance in Pizza Maggiore, this is a kind of production that involves conviviality and an open-ended creativity. This production has also assumed through and through “collective and scientific characteristics.” As Negri affirms, the refusal of work accrues “the maximum level of negation” as well as “the maximum level of synthesis.”³⁵ It is in fact a form of liberation that constructs the positivity of a new collective mode of production upon the negativity of the destruction of the capitalist mode of production. The refusal of work is thus active in two senses: it destructs the

³³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 4, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch09.htm#p459>>.

³⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, notebook 5, ed. Martin Nicolaus, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch10.htm>>.

³⁵ Negri, *Toward a Critique of the Material Constitution*, in *Books for Burning*, 199.

preceding order and generates an autonomous one founded on “*abstract intellectual energy as a specific productive force*.”³⁶ It is along these two lines that a worker’s self-valorization is progressively realized in open-ended fashion. Discontinuity and invention remain the main traits of this process, and not homogeneity and convergence of objectives.

Self-valorization obviously requires a continuous and formidable effort on the part of the working class. The problem of organizing the multiplicity of the questions at stake by the struggle was of primary importance. Negri stresses, in fact, the political element that the unity of this “social productive labor” also displays in the field of reproduction. Here, he argues, “the most immediate form taken by the refusal of work is that of the direct appropriation of wealth, either on the commercial level or on the institutional level.”³⁷ In addition to proletarian expropriation and occupation of public spaces, Negri tends to present the social unity produced by the process of self-valorization as a sufficient unitary terrain of struggle. The demand of wage for housework pairs that of a social wage for students with that of the unemployed males. These are all elements that erode the quota of power from capital and fuel the transition toward communism.³⁸

However, Negri never investigates possible discrepancies with regard to gender that might complicate this perilous march. The unitary dimension of the struggle provides the framework to deal with the three subjectivities that constituted the Movement: the students, the workers and women. It is true that it is a precise goal of capitalism to segment the working class and cannibalize its solidarity through strategic concessions, but women’s positionality in the articulation of the working

³⁶ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 268.

³⁷ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 274.

³⁸ See Antonio Negri, *Proletarian and the State: Towards a Discussion of Worker’s Autonomy and the Historic Compromise*, in *Books for Burning*, 145, 162.

class cannot be overlooked. As I have shown, for women the refusal of work also implies the sabotage of the family as well as waging a not so subtle war precisely against that non-labor time that the worker was striving to liberate. Reproduction for women was already a domain of oppression and of a contentious practice. I will come back to this point in my conclusion, but here I simply want to highlight the lack of analysis in Negri's assessment of this crucial issue. It reflects deeply his articulation of the organization of the political movement of the working class.

To be sure, the question of the organization of the process of self-valorization of living-labor, i.e. the fight against capital, is a key element in Negri's thought. In *Domination and Sabotage*, he believes that the positing of the question of a political organization is a crucial one. Even in its contradictory form, "the party today is the present reality of a real contradiction," he admits, and so it is important to assess it properly. On one side, in the history of the working class, the party represents a true "nightmare," since "there seems to exist a necessary relationship between institutionalization/reformism and the destruction of the independence of the proletariat, its betrayal."³⁹ Negri, in fact, observes that the "party is not an immediate element of the process of self-valorization." As a result, it is confined to an ancillary role; it represents "a function of the proletarian force, conceived as a guarantor of the process of self-valorization. The party is the army that defends the frontiers of proletarian independence."⁴⁰ This solution, however, is unsatisfactory. Negri seems to capture part of the problem that is grounded on the very material composition of the Movement and its development, but he cannot develop it in an extensive and productive way.

³⁹ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 275.

⁴⁰ Negri, *Domination and Sabotage*, 276.

The idea of a specialization of the party and of its restriction to pragmatic functions led, for example, to disastrous consequences for LC. It was from the ranks of its security section that *Prima Linea* (Front Line) recruited its troops and played a visible role in the dark season of Italian terrorism. The separation of functions within the organization cultivated, among the Security, a militarist ideology that was responsible for the dissociation between political analysis and collective struggle. This, in turn, led to the shortcut of the military solution carried out by a scant minority, mostly new militants who shared “resentment towards those who in their minds had given up and had a wrong idea of coherence.”⁴¹ Here I do not want to indict Negri of any of these developments – Italian law diligently carried out this task, framing him as one of the masterminds and primary mandator behind Italian terrorism. I simply want to point out that a basic organizing principle seems to be already at work within the self-valorizing process that reduces the party structure to a marginal element. This is why the question of the party will progressively vanish in Negri’s work, whereas the self-legislating power of the working force rises to an all-encompassing role.

Disutopia: Constituent Power and Desire

The second work by Negri I want to consider is *Insurgencies. Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Written in the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall, the book is remarkably free from the celebratory discourse about the new era of freedom that humanity was going to enjoy. Because of his long-run perspective, Negri’s analysis remains current today. The question of the party has by now withered away. The last sparks of the Workers’ Movement have been extinguished there where it all started: in the workshops of the Fiat. In the fall of 1980, forty thousand white collar

⁴¹ Viale, qtd. in Aldo Cazzullo, *I ragazzi che volevano fare la rivoluzione. 1968-1978: storia di Lotta continua* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 288; the denomination *Prima Linea* was used by the security section of LC who were in fact in the front line during marches and direct actions.

workers had marched breaking the thirty five days strike of the metalworkers. Realizing the defeat, the union then bargained a way out from the crisis that imposed a rotating system of wage subsidy for twenty-three thousand workers. A mass restructuring of the industrial production was under way that sanctioned not only the workers' defeat, but also the end of their centrality in the system of production.⁴² As Robert Lumley wrote "the assassination of Aldo Moro in May 1978 and the defeat of the Fiat factory occupations in October 1980 signaled the end of an era in which social movements and social conflict had dominated the language and horizons of a generation as well as the political agendas of governments."⁴³

Fiat once again marked a turning point in Italian history. From the point of view of political theory, this defeat implied the loss of a central form of subjectivity, one that in fact had carried out the task of representing the cornerstone of socialist and communist projects of liberation. Antonio Negri did not suffer this paradigmatic change at all, since his theorization of the social worker had already shifted the weight of political action outside the factory. If anything, he saw his theories regarding the coming of a new mode of production based on the general intellect having been proven correct. This is why today, Negri can proudly state that "perhaps we are not good politicians, and for that we were defeated. But we are good scientists, and that is no small feat."⁴⁴

Now if the worker is spread in the social fabric of post-modern society, what would his or her struggle look like? What directions and structure would the self-valorization process take? The problem that Negri faces here is to articulate the self-

⁴² See also Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2005); Gabriele Polo and Claudio Sabattini, *Restaurazione italiana: Fiat, la sconfitta operaia dell'autunno 1980: alle origini della controrivoluzione liberista* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2000); Andrea Sangiovanni *Tute blu: la parabola operaia nell'Italia repubblicana* (Roma: Donzelli, 2006).

⁴³ *States of Emergency. Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), 337

⁴⁴ Negri, "Quell'intelligente moltitudine," *Settantasette. La rivoluzione che viene*, Sergio Bianchi and Lanfranco Caminiti, ed., (Roma: Derive Approdi, 2004), 99.

legislating force and radical immanence of the struggle of the new subjectivities. The object of his investigation is thus sovereignty and its relation to *living-labor*, a term which we can equate with the worker's process of self-valorization as he had previously developed it. The explanation of the historical task of living-labor is clearly laid out. Living-labor plays the same role as the process of self-valorization in "destroying the equivocal quality of the bourgeois theory of labor (consolidated, accumulated, dead labor set against the creativity of living-labor)." The novelty in *Insurgencies* resides in the fact that now "bourgeois theory of power" is reframed and thought through as "an overdetermination of living-labor by dead labor."⁴⁵ Out of this confrontation with the juridical, Negri begins to outline the instantiation of the new revolutionary subjectivity. The *social worker* is replaced by the multitude as the subjective unfolding of the new social unity of intellectual and social labor of the general intellect.

Negri opens his analysis of the juridical by showing how the modern understanding of sovereignty as a foundational act that bestows power on a representative body or person, on behalf of a group of people, is illogical and absurd. In these theories the law is divorced from the power of regulating society, i.e. *constituent power*, and creates peculiar paradoxes that have enormous consequences in social terms. Usually the sovereign (the state) "can be defined as an immanent transcendence situated outside the control of those [the subjects] that also produced it as the expression of their own will" and form of protection.⁴⁶ The particular zone of exception that inaugurates this genealogy haunts modern society, re-emerging in its

⁴⁵ Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies. Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 32.

⁴⁶ Roberto Esposito, *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 60.

darkest moments as the suspension of the law and a return to this state of exception where pure decision and power hold sway.⁴⁷

Negri argues that the reduction of constituent power to a single historical moment, the writing of the constitution for instance, and its delimitation in terms of finality, the normative contents of the law, constitute the “mystification that juridical theory and practice take care to collect and rearticulate into the theories of sovereignty and representation.”⁴⁸ He then lays out a clear set of oppositions: on one side, the mystification of bourgeois thought which develops into a repressive and negative form of *sovereignty*, on the other, the potency of living-labor in ever renewing liberating processes. Sovereignty is in fact finalized, limited in space and time, and ossified in a “formal constitution.” Sovereignty is “constituted power,” that is to say the juridical incarnation of the law of value.⁴⁹ On the other hand, constituent power is “unfinalized.” It “implies a multidirectional plurality of times and spaces.”⁵⁰ Negri’s analysis of the American, the French, and the Soviet revolutions follow this clear line of demarcation. Whenever the energies of constituent power are frozen by institutionalization or by the disconnection from the open process of the forming of higher degrees of cooperation, the sovereign and its oppressive rule will rise again. For “whenever the political does not allow society to understand itself, to articulate itself in understanding, folly and terror will triumph.”⁵¹

Discussing the classics of political philosophy, Machiavelli, James Harrington and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Negri traces a sort of phenomenology of the emergence of

⁴⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). The events of March 1977 represent a typical case of the state of exception. See Barbieri Luca, “I giornali a processo: il caso 7 aprile,” *Carmillaonline.com*, 16 Aug. 2007, <<http://www.carmillaonline.com/archives/2007/08/002341.html#002341>>.

⁴⁸ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 12.

⁴⁹ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 12.

⁵⁰ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 12.

⁵¹ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 14.

constituent power. Because of the development of my argumentation so far, I will limit myself to explore the trajectory of constituent power as described in its relation to capital. Negri summarizes this transformation as follows:

The historical trajectory of capitalist development from primitive accumulation to post-industrial society is nothing but a continual process of subsumption of society under capital, a process in which capital has been insinuated into every relationship and become the connective key of every apparatus, the finality of every initiative.⁵²

As we know, primary accumulation is that violent phase in which capital establishes its own conditions of development by expropriating land and individuals from their previous mode of production. It is the moment when capital creates workers as wage-laborers. Between this and capital's later development, Negri also highlights the moment when the violence of primary accumulation gets articulated in a formal system of laws, a "juridical superstructure" that enforces "a mediated violence and a structure internal to the productive process." It is here that we notice the birth of a new order. It is the "pervasive and customary world of discipline" which "changes humans, increases their productivity, and socializes them."⁵³ This is still a Fordist phase. This is the apparatus that Gramsci was fighting. When new subjectivities raise the stakes of the struggle practicing a widespread indiscipline and claiming more money for less work, capital enters into a crisis that leads it to become a form of direct indifferent command.

⁵² Negri, *Insurgencies*, 250.

⁵³ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 256.

It is here that we encounter the radical inversion and the intensification of the creative social unity of society that will oblige Negri to declare that the time of “the dialectic is over.” With the rise of the general intellect “living social labor takes the place of the capitalist *mise en forme* of the social totality.” Now this is not the classical negation of the proletariat that turns upside down the capitalist order. Negri stresses that “there is no homology, no mechanical inversion,” since “this inversion is not something that happens between homologous elements, even opposite ones;” rather “it is an inversion that liberates creative force and that no longer defines the opposite as negative but only as residue.”⁵⁴ The constituent power of living-labor is already in action, totally immanent to historical development. Its revolutionary movement is already inscribed in the social fabric, in the intensification of cooperative work. Thus, there is no need of a negative moment, of an antithesis that subverts the state of things. Rather, what is needed is an accrument that exhausts the residue of the past. The consequence for the juridical field is felt directly.

In this context, which is our contemporary reality, the capitalist subsumption of social labor and the entire society is by now realized. But this means that social life has become immediately productive, that the sphere of labor corresponds to that of the political, and that economic rights and social rights coincide in any concept of citizenship.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 264.

⁵⁵ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 266.

The political and the social coincide. They are welded together by the fact that production is now a process that increases social collaboration. But has the revolution happened and was Antonio Negri the only one to have seen it? If we understand revolution to be a concrete and limited fact, the answer is no. However, if we assume it to be a process in time, we can respond affirmatively to this question. The revolution is the base of our own social development. Here Negri asks us to perform a very difficult mental effort. Far from being a distant goal, the revolution is instead an existing, and mutating condition that has to be brought to its full potential. Negri thus notices the “strange paradox” of our condition, one in which “equality, in this process, does not present itself anymore as the aim but as the condition.”⁵⁶

We have entered the realm of ontology, where liberation is the base of an ontological movement. If living-labor in its process of self-valorization was the motor of history, theoretically it was also the ontological base of becoming. What now becomes paramount, however, is the acceleration of this movement, which is still subjective, because it is the very multitude that repeatedly gives birth to new intensities through social reproduction. Quoting Spinoza, Negri recognizes that the acceleration of this process is *desire*, the “constituent passion of the *multitudo*.”⁵⁷ In the movement of becoming, the desire of the multitude keeps on fighting against moments of fixation, crystallizations that aim at normalizing its strength.

Fascism, for instance, is one of the most dangerous opponents of the constituent process of becoming, for it also bears the uncanny resemblance to the subjective determinations of the multitude. We have seen this point while discussing Gramsci’s philosophy of practice and its difference with Giovanni Gentile’s actualism. Negri is well aware of the relation. He warns that “fascism is this perverse conception

⁵⁶ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 315.

⁵⁷ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 303.

of constituent power.” It is “the brutal act of using force” which sums up “the fascist disfiguring of constituent power.”⁵⁸ But increased socialization and desire are also traits of the fascist organization of society. Can we clearly draw a line between a positive and a negative passion of the multitude?

For Negri, the difference between the always open becoming of the multitude and fascism lies in the polarization of fascism “in the dimension of its crisis,” in its being “absolutely inimical to any determination of the strength of the multitude.”⁵⁹ Here we are predicating, however, fascist difference on the basis of the multitude’s positivity. That means that the slide to fascism is very short indeed, so short that it is difficult to set apart the two. Gramsci had differentiated Gentile’s actualist philosophy from the methodology of philosophy praxis, by underscoring the alterity and resistance exercised by the environment against the subjectivity that aims at transforming it. This friction is tied to the production of a knowledge, which to the extent that is a plan of action, becomes power. Gramsci’s immanence is a process of finitization that is open to change, but which is in dialectical relation to capital. Negri has dissolved the dialectical moment in the immanence of the field of experience. This one-dimensional nature of historical becoming precludes any solution other than the intensification of its own development. As we will see the problem of indistinguishability reoccurs in Negri’s understanding of the multitude.

⁵⁸ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 316. This is why a movie like *Saló* is still so disturbing for us. It gives back the image of passion as seen from a fascist point of view. Pasolini’s insistence on the visualization of frame, whether narrative (the different narrators, the circles etc.), or meta-filmic, the binocular of the final scene, might gesture precisely towards this very fact. We are looking at a sort of photo-negative of the intensification of the process of liberation. In this regard, Pasolini certainly has a point that Negri seems to miss. The unbounded possibility of desire and power can be read in counter-relief as the visualization of the biopolitical potential. Pasolini feels the dangers of the biopolitical acceleration and, through the reversal of a liberated sexuality, throws back at us the image of the potential for a more oppressive form of domination, that of consumerism. Hence the unbearable nature of the movie. Fascism is ambiguously tied to desire.

⁵⁹ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 316. My critique here is similar to the point Žižek makes on the ambiguity of Deleuze’s notion of fascism, see *Organs Without Bodies. On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 187.

This planar and horizontal vision is better explained through the concept of *disutopia* as “the absolute affirmation” of a “substantial being [a]s a solid and full subjectivity recuperated and reconstructed within projectivity.” Rejoicing, Negri adds that “finally we are given a world, in a century where rationalistic idealistic dualism tears reality apart.”⁶⁰ The prefix “dis” works as privative (in the sense of lacking) that does not negate or reverse the noun, as in *dis-topia* which conveys the meaning of a utopia turned upside down. The privative negates the utopian, unrealistic character of its realization, and simultaneously unleashes in the real its positive, revolutionary quality. *Disutopia* is another term for ontology and its constitutive process. It signifies the presence of utopia as the erasure of its utopian character. The latter obviously involves discontinuities, differentiations, and “innovation that, after having constituted the individuals into a multitude, determine the strength of the latter.”⁶¹ The limitless nature of *disutopia* stands against the “measure” and “limits” imposed by sovereignty.⁶² Furthermore, in this new environment, the constituent power of the multitude realizes a particular unification of “procedure” and “process,” where “the controls are exercised as active moments of the procedure and not imputed from outside. [...] Procedure is the concrete form that each figure of subjectivity assumes in its relating to others.”⁶³ The origin stands close to its development, since this is not a power constituted in a remote past, but rather it is the presentness of the becoming. It is constituent and constitutive of its own becoming.

Here we fully understand Negri’s response to the paradox of the origin in modern state theory, where the foundational act is temporarily relegated to the past, but which keeps pressing in on the present with the re-emergence of the sovereign

⁶⁰ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly. The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 167.

⁶¹ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 323.

⁶² Negri, *Insurgencies*, 327-329.

⁶³ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 329.

despotism resorting to the state of exception.⁶⁴ The insistence in the present of this foundational moment is instead fully assumed in Negri and disseminated in the movement of the multitude. Obviously, the presentness of constituent power is not realized and constituted once and for all in the determination of the present. This is a present in action that needs to be intensified and increased, since the world we live in now is not a world of “freedom,” but that of “liberation, disutopia in action, relentless and as painful as it is constructive.”⁶⁵ Thus far Negri has articulated a theory of the subject – the ontological drama that leads from the mass worker to the multitude – and its political theory in terms of constituent power embedded in the liberation of living-labor – i.e. transformation of Fordism into the post-Fordist epoch of the general intellect.

Meanwhile, capital has not been immobile. Capital, especially at the ideological level, had been successful in its restructuring and stabilizing of the indiscipline of living-labor. It even embellished the new form of exploitation with the promise of endless development, freedom and wealth for the whole globe. It was the miracle called globalization. By the second half of the 1990s, a new planetary consensus seemed to have conquered the worldviews of political elites. What was global was positive; what was positive had to be global.

5.2 Negri’s New Ontology of the Present

During the gloomy days of his imprisonment, Gramsci elaborated upon the idea of fatalism. Contrary to what might be believed, Gramsci pointed out that this stance is not a passive attitude. Rather it “is nothing other than the clothing worn by real and active will when in a weak position.”⁶⁶ This is a statement that Negri would

⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶⁵ Negri, *Insurgencies*, 335.

⁶⁶ Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks*, 337.

clearly endorse, for his belief in the vitalism of subjectivity never falters. As he recalls in a recent interview: “I was always struck by the fact that all the factory workers knew perfectly well that they were heading for total defeat and yet did not refrain from fighting, because they also knew perfectly well that there was an absolute irreducible creative element within their defeat.”⁶⁷

The creativity of their defeat shaped the basic features of today’s society. Negri was well aware of it even before the concrete defeat of the movement. In *Proletarian and the State* (1975), he pointed out the strongholds of capital’s restructuring. They were the implementation of technology, a constant process initiated already in the sixties, as well as the “*socialization, tertiarization, and flexibility* (decentralization etc.) of industrial labor.”⁶⁸ The shift towards smaller units of production, what is now commonly known as the outsourcing of production, was quickly enforced along with a deregulation of standard labor contracts and rights conquered in the past. Part of the workforce was also reallocated into the service sector, a new field that, although it emphasized production based on communication networks, promoted, in the everyday life, an individualization of work and rendered more difficult any labor organization.

Technology here too played a fundamental role. In an economy based on providing services, the supremacy of computer science masked this change in production with the shining promise of a new and free way of working. Reconfiguring work as a sort of artist-like occupation, it insisted on creativity and flexibility as positive elements. Meanwhile, local economies were increasingly linked to a wider global dimension: with the world market now finally rendered more homogeneous and cost-effective, production grew exponentially in terms of transnational operations thanks also to a remarkable progress in communication and transportation. Italy

⁶⁷ Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, 129.

⁶⁸ Negri, *Proletarians and the State*, 143.

embraced rapidly this new stage of development, one that is now commonly known as post-Fordism and whose ideology is represented by neoliberalism.⁶⁹ Neoliberalism also imposed a powerful worldview that at least for a decade, from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the opening of the new millennium, seemed to be hegemonic.

It so happened that the kernels of *disutopia* – socialization, flexibility, creativity – were integrated into capital to such an extent that one may wonder if, in fact, living-labor gave birth to a neoliberal dystopia. Negri had warned that the multitude was not going yet to enjoy freedom. Rather the multitude was simply in the process of bringing forward its own liberation. But how can one account for the sort of freedom neoliberalism fostered? With what kind of freedom are we dealing with and in what ways is the multitude connected to it? In order to respond to this question, we need to consider two works that Negri has written in collaboration with Michael Hardt *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004).

Let us start with the much discussed *Empire*. Along with Naomi Klein *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (2000), and independently from the critiques and the debate it raised, this was a book that enjoyed a vast influence on the Anti-Globalization Movement. As the Clintonian years of humanitarian wars and new economy wane, *Empire* was a particularly interesting work that provided activists with a set of critical tools to analyze the powerful hegemony of neoliberalism. The most important of these tools was probably the concept of the *biopolitical*. Negri and Hardt provide a specific interpretation of it that draws on the “epochal passage” between what Foucault called disciplinary society, to the society of control.

⁶⁹ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism & Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).

Disciplinary society is that society in which social command is constructed through a diffuse network of dispositifs or apparatuses that produce and regulate customs, habits, and productive practices. [...] We could say that the entire first phase of capitalist accumulation (in Europe and elsewhere) was conducted under this paradigm of power.⁷⁰

Disciplinary society is thus coercive and mechanical in the application of its principles. Its system of production develops from the first manufacturing industries to the application of Fordism. Chronologically, it thus embraces a large breath of time, spreading until the beginning of neocapitalism. Things began to change precisely with the emergence of the new subjectivity of the Anti-Globalization Movement. *Empire* here is less precise in defining the specific junctures that lead to a change in the paradigm of power. What seem understated are the emergence of state command and its radical moment of brute force laid out in *Domination and Sabotage*. For when the new paradigm is established, the new society of control seems to rely on “mechanisms of command” that look “more democratic, ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens.”⁷¹

We find ourselves already well within the neoliberal disutopia, without having passed through the violent imposition of a new order by the state. As a partial explanation for this simplification, I want to mention that the subject matter, as well as the public of *Empire* is international, so that the Italian contribution to the establishment of a new world order in some sense recedes to the background. Moreover, even for a large part of the new generation that contributed to the Anti-

⁷⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 23.

⁷¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 23.

Globalization Movement, this lack did not have real consequence, since what seemed more urgent was understanding and criticizing the *now* of the disutopia. This entailed facing a subtle form of control that while proclaiming the empowerment of the creativity of the individuals was at the same time enslaving them in a more subtle form of domination. This is what Hardt and Negri call *biopower*, a form of control that

Regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it and rearticulating it. [...] The highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself.⁷²

Biopower is thus the new connectivity that holds together a more flexible system of production, but in its descending into the body and the mind of the laborers, biopower becomes also volatile, being simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. It is so pervasive as to make it difficult to locate it. Biopower is the mechanism that keeps disutopia in check. As in Negri's preceding works, here too we begin from the point of view of command in order to show how capital's condition is in reality the mystification of a positive development of the subordinated subjectivity. This is the realm of the biopolitical, of which biopower represents a repressing force that acts through a "series of interventions."⁷³

⁷² Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 24.

⁷³ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 35.

Foucault against Foucault

Before we move into the specificity of these interventions, let us briefly recapitulate what Foucault had actually said regarding the coming under control of life in terms of biopower and biopolitics. Foucault develops this new field of study in a series of public lectures. In these courses collected under the title '*Society Must Be Defended*' 1975-1976, Foucault gestures towards the concept of biopolitics while exploring the notion of biopower. Here he connects biopower directly with "the right of the sword," the sovereign's right to "make live and to let die" that the state assumes as its prerogative," and which can be dated in the "second half of the eighteenth Century."⁷⁴ As Foucault further explains "unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man as-living-being."⁷⁵

Biopower is thus framed within the limits of disciplinary society, and in fact it involves classical apparatuses of state control "such as the ratio of birth to death, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of the population and so on."⁷⁶ Urban planning, demography, statistics, welfare, systems of immunization, as well as institutions like psychiatric hospitals and police, they are all "security mechanisms" that govern the population from above. They represent a vertical and static form of administration of life. This is confirmed by the introduction of the idea of racism that discloses the death-like shade of biopower. Power needs to differentiate and introduce "a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."⁷⁷ Racism is not a simple war against the enemy, since biopower has to recreate within its domain the *other* in order to legitimately kill or let die. Biopower is

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended 1975-1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 210, 211, 212.

⁷⁵ Foucault, *Society*, 212.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Society*, 213.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *Society*, 254.

thus control and protection that resorts to violence and killing on the basis of the discrimination between the *us* and the *other* conceived as something dangerous for the well-being of a better society.

Two years later, in the *Lecture at the Collège de France* (now published under the title *The Birth of Biopolitics*) Michel Foucault turns to the concept of biopolitics, but this time he is investigating governmentality as a new reflexive practice; as the conceptualization of a technique, with very little reference to population as the distinct modern element that comes under the control of the state. According to *The Birth of Biopolitics* the great transformation of these technologies of power occurs with the passage from *political* economy to *economy*, that is, from an external order imposed on production and exchange to a self-regenerative principle, one that marks the birth of *neoliberalism*. It is a portentous expansion of an economic ratio that becomes the yardstick to represent all non-economic territories: politics, law, education etc. As Foucault puts it, neoliberalism brings forward “the possibility of giving a strictly economic interpretation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic.”⁷⁸

The subject of this mutation is *labor*. Through the study of German post-war and Chicago School Liberalism, Foucault stresses the transformation that the notion of labor suffers as it passes from wage-labor, whose price is determined by the law of supply and demand, to labor as the monetary gain that laborer makes by becoming *human capital*. To Foucault this change appears as the discovery of a human potentiality that the commodification induced by wage-labor had obscured.⁷⁹ It is the activation of a procedure that fuels an exceptional dynamism.

Once labor-power is conceived of as human capital and every worker is endowed with the capacity to produce gain, or to become a hub of “earning streams”

⁷⁸ *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219.

⁷⁹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 219-222.

as Foucault argues, the typical capitalist process of accumulation is extended to the entire population.⁸⁰ Every individual is now competing as an enterprise that produces profit, and invests it in order to remain competitive. Being competitive in turn, calls for the strenuous work of self-improvement and permanent self-valorization. Laborers are in fact “abilities-machines” who need to invest in themselves to produce income.⁸¹ This is the biopolitical dimension that the advance of neoliberalism imposes. It is an immanent drive toward the development of labor potentiality that demands a constant capitalization of the individual.

As an immanent, self-multiplying mechanism, biopolitics does not require any external authority for directing the operations. It is the twilight of politics, for politics withers away into the self-regulative operativeness of society. *Civil society* incarnates the progressive element of this biopolitical transformation of society not as a people united in a “pact of subjection,” but as a technique of government that promotes the multiplication of a “a distinct interplay of non-egoist, disinterested interests.” These bear a striking resemblance to the “multiplication of profit in the purely economic mechanism of interests” of neoliberal economy.⁸²

There are remarkable differences between what Hardt and Negri take from Foucault and what he actually articulates with the concepts of biopower and biopolitics. It is almost a reading of Foucault *against* Foucault, or a Deleuzian reading of Foucault. To recapitulate, in *Empire*, biopower is updated as a contemporary technology of control, whereas in Foucault biopower seems more a dispositive of an older phase of development, one clearly rooted in a disciplinary society. Biopolitics, instead, is the substratum of postmodern society, but it is mostly the result of a transformation at the level of capital. The spaces of liberation that Foucault detects are

⁸⁰ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 224.

⁸¹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 229.

⁸² *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 300, 301.

merely a consequence to this economic transformation. There is no real agency of living-labor other than exploiting the “liberogenetic” mechanisms of liberal governmentality.⁸³

In *Empire*, we find the terms biopower and biopolitics closely connected, with the former as an updated version of Foucault’s disciplinary device. As a result, when Hardt and Negri talk about biopower and its interventions, they are actually employing Foucault’s discovery of the assumptions of the neoliberal art of governing of a biopolitical society, and not of what he calls biopower. Most importantly, in privileging the economic substratum of the biopolitical, Foucault’s argument seems at odds with Hardt and Negri who, as I stressed, give priority to the autonomy of subaltern subjectivities.⁸⁴ This is not surprising, for as I later show, biopolitics is an ambiguous category, one that Negri too easily endows with a liberating capacity.

Biopower Interventions and Immaterial Labor

The interventions of biopower are multiple and vary in relation to their operative domain. Let me begin at a geopolitical level by addressing the operations dispatched on a global scale. If in *Empire*, Hardt and Negri discuss a certain type of application of biopower, with the rise of George W. Bush administration, they now have to make remarkable corrections to their analysis. Their second work *Multitude* is in fact a response to these changes. First let’s take up *Empire* and then make our way to *Multitude*.

⁸³ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 69.

⁸⁴ A more faithful interpretation of Foucault’s concept of biopolitics is probably Roberto Esposito’s. *Bios. Biopolitics and Philosophy*. He conceives the degeneration of biopolitics into thanatopolitics as a particular case of immunity crisis, in which the system in order to survive actually destroys itself. Now this is the crisis embodied by the sovereign. In immunization in fact, negation is the “intrinsically antinomic mode by which life preserves itself through power,” 46. Here Foucault’s understanding of the biopolitical transformation is preserved in its productive and oppressive potential.

Biopower here takes the form of humanitarian war or “just war” as a sort of primary “exercise of legitimate force,” one that serves to legitimize its new power partly through “the effectiveness of its use of force.”⁸⁵ The difference with “the old international order” is blatant. The disintegration of clear cut spaces under the liquid and ubiquitous imperial rule exposes “the unbounded terrain of its activities, the singularization and symbolic localization of its actions, and the connection of repressive action to all the aspects of the biopolitical structure of society.”⁸⁶ These military interventions, camouflaged as global police operations, are based on the pretext of protecting human rights and had their baptism of fire in 1999, in the territories of former Yugoslavia.

In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri need to face the mutation in the international relationships brought on by the Bush administration. War now becomes central; it is the “general matrix for all relations of power and techniques of domination.”⁸⁷ *Empire*’s more democratic mechanisms of control are set aside to make room for the gloomy spirit of the present. One notices a return to biopower in a strictly Foucaultian term, as the re-emergence of the right of the sword, except that the latter is disseminated indifferently across the social body. After having explored the relationship between the new US doctrine of war and its counter-response terrorism, Hardt and Negri argue that war aims at “accomplish[ing] a constituent and regulative function,” as “a procedural activity and an ordering, regulative activity that creates and maintains social hierarchies.”⁸⁸

The United States turn toward a sovereign type of biopower has relevant consequences for Hardt and Negri’s theory of imperial power. On one side, entering a

⁸⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 34.

⁸⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 35.

⁸⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 13.

⁸⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 21.

phase of constant and unlimited war, the American administration also altered its juridical legislation with regard to circulation and basic democratic rights. On the other, it forestalled the supremacy of one specific nation state that challenged the idea of a global, undifferentiated imperial space. Later on in fact Negri admitted that undoubtedly the “American ruling classes [were] tempted very much to transform the empire into an entity over which the United States could rule no longer as a republic, but as a specific nation.”⁸⁹ This monarchical-national twist seems quite a stretch and complicates the progression that Negri developed in his work. He can only respond that “Empire is a tendency, and, much like all tendencies, it can be guided in a variety of ways.”⁹⁰ As I soon show, one of the reasons of this difficulty in adapting his notion of Empire to the rapid change of reality is probably a residuum of linearity and modern teleology in his understanding of capital’s development.

Another consequence of the unilateralism of the American administration is the rapid decline of global organizations that supported and safeguarded globalization. Before their decline, these institutions truly had a central role and neoliberalism invested heavily in their activity. When it did not resort to limited police operations, the Empire exerted “moral intervention,” through non-governmental organizations and juridical and economic interventions through a series of global institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, or the World Trade Organization. For the Anti-Globalization Movement these institutions, and especially the G8 summits among the heads of the most industrialized countries, became the direct target of their protests. They represented a higher level of power in which decision-making was

⁸⁹ Negri also adds that “Bush son represents the nation while a large portion of the American people still represents the republic,” only time will tell us if this is actually true and the new administration will listen to its elector. Casarino and Negri, 76.

⁹⁰ Casarino and Negri, 77.

simply the result of a business agreement among a few elite and for their own return. The impact of their policy had tremendous effects across the globe.

These structural changes to which nation states had to conform were justified precisely on the assumption that economy had to be left free to follow its course in order to stimulate the production of global wealth. The dynamism of the market had to be preserved by removing barriers and protections. Hardt and Negri here are very acute on disclosing the reconfiguration of this ideology at a cultural level. They argue that “the ideology of the world market has always been the anti-foundational and anti-essentialist discourse par excellence. Circulation, mobility, diversity, and mixture are its very conditions of possibility. Trade brings differences together.”⁹¹ Furthermore, differences are also produced as “cultural rather than political” elements.⁹² The goal is the production of the ethnic for marketing purposes and the intensification of commercial incorporation of everyday life on a global scale. Along this line, Naomi Klein revealed, how one of the pillars of globalization was precisely a new wave of branding, of creation of logos in order to sell that resorted on the ethnic and street culture as sources for ideas and models.⁹³

The homology with what has been called postmodern thought here is impressive. Consider the same anti-essentialist critique, the emphasis on contamination as the producer of novelty, the stress on indeterminacy and the artificial, a-referential nature of representation (such as the grand narratives of modernity) and against binary oppositions. Postmodernism and neoliberalism incarnate a radical critique of any limitation of foundation of a human activity that is not exclusively based on performance. As the great systematizer of this new cultural shift, Jean-François Lyotard, has argued “in contemporary society and culture – post-

⁹¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 150.

⁹² Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 199.

⁹³ See *No logo* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002), 63-85, 120-123.

industrial society, postmodern culture – [...] the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.”⁹⁴ Performance here can be understood economically. Just like a stock that performs well on the market, knowledge “will be reproduced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production.”⁹⁵ Performance implies a constant effort of innovation. Difference and novelty replace the homogeneity of the static totality of the old meta-narratives.

Hardt’s and Negri’s critique brings postmodern philosophy back to its historical dimension. As they argue “difference, hybridity, and mobility are not liberatory in themselves, but neither are truth, purity, and stasis. [...] Truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will. Mobility and hybridity are not liberatory, but talking control of the production of mobility and stasis, purities and mixtures is.”⁹⁶ This signals also a slight shift from Negri’s previous positions. Here Negri’s emphasis on movement and the creative power of living-labor must be demarcated from the discourse on difference and contamination carried out by postmodernism and made consonant to the reappropriative move of the multitude. In this sense, they do not endorse an uncritical negation of postmodernism, but its proper historization. As a critique of “modern sovereignty,” postmodernism had its point and was a useful strategy, but now its analysis is beginning to wear thin. The failure to “recognize clearly the forms of power that have today come to supplant” modern sovereignty, engages postmodern intellectuals in a “battle against the shadows of old enemies.”⁹⁷ For in fact, “the affirmation of hybridities and the free play of differences

⁹⁴ *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 37.

⁹⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 4.

⁹⁶ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 156; for a similar critique See Paolo Virno, *Scienze sociali e “natura umana.”* *Facoltà di linguaggio, invariante biologico, rapporti di produzione* (Catanzaro: Rubettino, 2003), 7.

⁹⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 142.

across boundaries, however, is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary oppositions, and stable oppositions.”⁹⁸

We are now moving closer to the analysis of the microphysics of biopower’s interventions. From the global sovereign dimension onwards, the new jurisdiction of Empire shapes behaviors and social practices, namely the biopolitical substratum of life. Hardt and Negri’s analysis of immaterial labor is still a decisive contribution and must be assessed in detail. They define immaterial labor as a productive activity typical of a society that gives priority to tertiary services, such as technology production, education, administration and so on. Immaterial labor unfolds as a model of a rich communication for it “produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication.”⁹⁹ There are three kinds of immaterial production that inform today’s labor processes. The first is an “informational economy” and an industrial production based on a larger share of scientific knowledge and computer controlled machinery.¹⁰⁰ The second is a broader category including any form of “analytical and symbolic tasks.” From web-design to “normal” secretarial jobs, from scientific research to old-fashioned teaching in an academic institution, all these activities display a peculiar tendency toward the breeding of capacities and ideas that are difficult to quantify and pin down to some material referent. Finally, the third category is one we have investigated at length in our previous chapter. It is the work of reproduction that involves the “production and manipulation of affect,” the oldest and most vilified form of immaterial labor that there is: domestic duties and personal care.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 142.

⁹⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 290.

¹⁰⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 293.

¹⁰¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 293.

The “three types of labor that drive the post-modernization of the global economy” bring about a deep biopolitical transformation. Women have experienced it since the institution of the nuclear family as the pillar of industrial society. Now the spatial and temporal dimension of immaterial work quickly colonizes the majority of the social body.

Consider, for example, the transformation of the working day in the immaterial paradigm, that is, the increasingly indefinite division between work time and leisure time. In the industrial paradigm workers produced almost exclusively during the hours in the factory. When production is aimed at solving a problem, however, or creating an idea or a relationship, work time tends to expand to the entire time of life.¹⁰²

These work relations produce a new temporality, one characterized by a zone of inseparability between labor and non-labor that swallows the whole of individual life. What was true for women’s domestic labor becomes true for the intellectual worker as well. First, any leap in technology is, in the end, an opportunity to work more. Second, the interiorization of a subtle work ethic that recalls the famous female abnegation fosters a compulsion to work indefinitely. Thus the endlessness of labor becomes a permanent condition. Here we reach the ultimate reversal. The colonization of social time by labor seems to have a limit only in the necessary moments of rest so as to restore physical energies. Yet since, as neo-feminism made clear, reproduction is already an activity out of which capital extracts value, this is the final mystification!

¹⁰² Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 111.

Negri and Hardt also underscore three other characteristics of immaterial labor that slightly diverge from domestic work. It is “*flexible* because workers have to adapt to different tasks, *mobile* because workers have to move frequently between jobs, and *precarious* because no contracts guarantee stable, long-term employment.”¹⁰³ In this, immaterial labor recalls older forms of professional figures such as the day laborers of the 1800 more than the new and highly skilled jobs of the new millennium. To be sure, today’s workforce knows how to operate computers and sophisticated software. It masters languages and works in networks. But when it comes to basic rights, like paid holidays, healthcare, protection against unfair treatments on the job, the difference between typing on a laptop and waving a sickle in the field seem minimal.

Yet this form of exploitation is not simply individual. Rather it involves, for Hardt and Negri, “the capture of value that is produced by cooperative labor and that becomes increasingly common through its circulation in social networks.”¹⁰⁴ This new temporality is also the final proof of what Negri has been arguing for so long now: that the law of value has declined. With the vanishing of the law of value, though, it becomes impossible to calculate exploitation temporally.

Surplus-labor time and the surplus-value produced during that time are the key to Marx’s definition of exploitation. [...] But today the paradigm of immaterial production, the theory of value cannot be conceived in terms of measured quantities of time, and so exploitation cannot be understood in these terms. Just as we must understand the production of value in terms of the common, so too must we try to

¹⁰³ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 112.

¹⁰⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 113.

conceive exploitation *as the expropriation of the common*.

The common, in other words, has become the locus of surplus-value. Exploitation is the private appropriation of part or all of the value that has been produced as common.¹⁰⁵

The projection of exploitation to the larger plane of the common is a difficult concept to grasp and put into practice for it traverses the whole of the social unity the multitude produces. One of the solutions called forth by this analysis is *social wage*, a proposal that grew out of 1968, first in the Student Movement, and later also in the neo-feminist group of *Lotta Femminista*. Also the Anti-Globalization Movement developed this set of analyses, including the proposal for a social wage, and based a large part of its program on how to safeguard the environment, as well as the struggle against the privatization of natural resources or public structures such as education, healthcare and so on. However, I am not convinced that in *Empire* or even *Multitude* Hardt and Negri would endorse this idea of the common. There is scant reference to the environmental issue which was instead so central for the Anti-Globalization Movement. When outlining what is in fact the common, Hardt's and Negri's emphasis falls obviously on immaterial labor and on the capacity to produce value biopolitically. Now here we encounter another difficulty. If the common is the appropriation of surplus-value by capital that means that our goal is inextricably tied to capital's process of accumulation. If the common is the intellectual laborer's immaterial work that is under-paid in terms of salary, benefits and social protection, how can the multitude turn exploitation to its advantage? And in service of what? "Common is that which enriches the productivity of singularities [*dei singoli*]! Common is the fact that a lot of ideas come to me when you and I talk about something!" Negri says. Yet if

¹⁰⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 150.

that cooperation is finally taken away, if in that sociality we are actually under the iron heel of capital's exploitation, how then do we reverse it? In other words, as Casarino advocates, we need to "distinguish capital from its own foundation in the common."¹⁰⁶ The overcoming of dialectics creates remarkable problems in this sense.

Hardt and Negri also answer in another way, calling on the poor as the "paradigm of immaterial production" and "the flesh of biopolitical production." The poor do not come from a specific part of the globe; they include or comprise the flexible, precarious intellectual worker as "the figure of [the] general possibility and thus the source of all wealth."¹⁰⁷ This is not, of course, the kind of poverty one expects in an age of scarcity. It is poverty in an age of abundance, that is to say a "phenomenon that has already absorbed and incorporated its own integration in the totality of the system."¹⁰⁸ In other words, it is a poverty endowed with a biopolitical capacity. Yet, as a kind of poverty due not to a lack of consumption, but to a massive libidinal consumption, it is also exposed the critique Pasolini made. This is a poverty that feeds on a consumerist subculture. Furthermore, against the relative unity and continuity at the level of the final social product, one notices that for the individual the precariousness and fragmentation of his or her working conditions does not exactly facilitate any mechanism of re-appropriation. Hardt and Negri never really investigate repercussions in the actual sociality of larger and larger number of people exposed to uncertainty, to the fragility of the everyday. According to them, the specific and complicated mechanisms of exploitation are subsumed under the unifying moment of the production of collective wealth which is already present and actual. One needs only to grab it.

¹⁰⁶ Casarino and Negri, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 152.

¹⁰⁸ Casarino and Negri, 94.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the fundamental work produced by Marxist neo-feminism it is that in a biopolitical dimension what oppresses you is also what you love. Hence the need for a separation; hence a refusal that cannot be turned into another form of productivity. The decrease in the birth rate, for instance, is a case of subterranean, but effective, negation of productivity. In *Empire*, unfortunately, there is not much ground for such a dialectical move. Dystopia is all-encompassing. As in Negri's preceding works, the only road to social change is an acceleration of the biopolitical towards a global communality.

Capital has shifted from what Marx called *formal* subsumption to a *real* subsumption. Hardt and Negri argue in fact that if "modern accumulation is based on the formal subsumption of the non-capitalist environment," now instead "postmodern accumulation relies on the real subsumption of the capitalist terrain itself."¹⁰⁹ In short, having used up the outside, having incorporated laboring practices that originated outside its domain, capital turns around, and capitalizes the ground covered through the previous modernization. This passage is once again "explained through the practices of active subjective forces."¹¹⁰ The first movement, that of establishing the conditions of its relations of production (formal subsumption), is in fact "anticipated and carried through to maturity" by subaltern groups and then bypassed into the process of "real subsumption," that is of integration of labor itself through socialization. This is because in the latter "were constructed conditions of liberation and struggle" that only real subsumption could "control."¹¹¹

From the viewpoint of political thought, this also means that the multitude is "the self-erasure of the working class," which, fighting to liberate itself from the law of value, disassembled the rigid and compartmentalized form of capital, pushing it

¹⁰⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 272.

¹¹⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 255.

¹¹¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 256.

toward the global dimension of the Empire.¹¹² If it was the working class that summoned Empire, it is now up to the Multitude to liberate the common, instituting thereby the republic of the general intellect. Biopolitics is the proper constituent power that through its intensification and acceleration will fuel this process of liberation.

5.3 A Critique of Hardt's and Negri's Notion of Biopolitics

Thus far I have explored the general argument that Negri developed from his early work of the 1970s to his recent collaboration with Michael Hardt. Terminology has shifted over the years, but we can point towards the appearance of immaterial labor as the biopolitical moment that gives substance to a process of liberation. The trajectory is clear. If the previous mode of regulation was informed by a Fordist organization of labor, along with Keynesian policies (welfare state), the shift to post-Fordism and postmodernity is based on a greater flexibility in terms of the space of production (deterritorialization-delocalization), on a different temporality (the indistinguishability between labor time and non-labor time) in the organization of production, on the regulation (deregulation) of market conditions, and finally on a tendency towards immaterial production. All these changes have been summoned by living-labor in its attempt to liberate itself. Biopower represents instead all the various forms that buffer the full socialization of living power under non-exploitative relations.

This hypothesis is not satisfactory. The passage from exploitation to liberation seems too smooth, as if the exploitative layering were only a formal element of the relation of production. It is as if the *mode* of production of immaterial labor has no real impact in the deep structure of society itself, as if it did not sink its teeth into the latter, branding it with its mark of domination. There are a few points I want to make

¹¹² Casarino and Negri, 96.

in this regard. The first is a correction that may help us provide a better picture of the new context of immaterial production. One of the elements that Hardt and Negri overlook is the huge role played by financial speculation. The level of abstraction of labor is also a consequence of the push toward an economy that relies on investment and stock exchange more than on material production. Hardt and Negri point to that in *Multitude* when they argue that “the profits of finance capital are probably in its purest form the expropriation of the common.”¹¹³

But I believe there are more comprehensive and detailed explanations for the contemporary “phenomenon of financial deepening or financialization which occurs with the growth of financial transactions far exceed[ing] the growth of the underlying economic fundamentals of production and trade.”¹¹⁴ Giovanni Arrighi, for example, explored this shift, inserting it into a cyclical change of capital’s mode of regulation. Capital shifts from a phase predominantly based on a material growth (material production) to a phase of financial expansion. So where M=liquidity and flexibility, C=commodity, capital concreteness and rigidity, and finally M’=expanded liquidity, the systemic cycle of accumulation indicated by Marx would move from the MC phases (capital’s accumulation) to the CM’ phases of expansion. As Arrighi states: “in phases of material expansion money capital set’s in motion an increasing mass of commodities (including commoditized labor-power and gifts of nature: MC); in phases of financial expansion an increasing mass of money-capital set’s itself free from its commodity form and accumulation proceeds through financial deals” (1994: 6). It thus reaches Marx’s abbreviated form MM’, where money is invested in finance, and where capital overlooks production and becomes abstract.

¹¹³ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 151.

¹¹⁴ Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the postcolonial world: the new political economy of development* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2001), 139.

Hardt and Negri admittedly critique the “methodology of long cycles” because in Arrighi’s description “it is impossible to recognize a rupture of the system, a paradigm shift, an event.”¹¹⁵ Yet Arrighi’s analysis is grounded on capital’s drive towards accumulation, as a result, these shifts are not systematic changes led by capital itself, but the result from the shrinking of profitability due to the struggle of proletarian groups. Arrighi’s investigation of cycles does not seem as fatalistic as Hardt and Negri depict it, and it provides us with a more comprehensive view of one of the key factors in globalization.

That said, it is in the implicit teleology that leads from formal subsumption to real subsumption that Hardt’s and Negri’s argument waver. I am not basing my critique on any sort of ontological claim. I will not suggest that Hardt’s and Negri’s argument is defective because it is tainted by the ignominy of linearity and teleology. There are probably more linearities that work at a regional level than postmodern philosophers imagine. My own argumentation is built on a dialectical progression, certainly one that cannot point to a final synthesis. It is in the dialectic between capital and labor that linearity and homogeneity have been dispersed into hybrid patterns. Superimposed to a consistent and causal narrative of progress and advancement, we now face a new temporality that collapses various forms of historical development into a co-presence. As Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola write our temporality is one “in which the ensemble of pasts that modern capitalism has encountered in its course re-emerges in disorderly fashion, in a sort of universal exhibition.”¹¹⁶ This is why I find two problems in Hardt’s and Negri’s explanation. The first is that they rely too much on a spatial notion of subsumption. To be sure, the process of primary

¹¹⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 239.

¹¹⁶ Sandro Mezzadra and Federico Rahola, “The Postcolonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present,” *Postcolonial Text*, 1 (2006), <[http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/393/139%20\(1%20of%2014\)31/07/2008%2011.15.39](http://postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/393/139%20(1%20of%2014)31/07/2008%2011.15.39)>.

accumulation to which formal subsumption is linked, and that Marx describes with the expropriation of land called the process of *enclosure*, is also a conquest of concrete space.¹¹⁷ The extension of the global market is in part also the subjection under the rule of the market of a larger portion of spaces. Yet relying too much on this spatial paradigm may lead to problems. Once the globe is colonized, once there is no more outside, capital seems to have finished its task and can only move to a different set of actions. This new stage establishes a progression with respect to the former. But capital's expansion is not only territorial, nor is it merely extensive. It is always intensive insofar as capital must constantly reproduce its condition of existence even within its older domains. Depending on the level of resistance, capital deploys different forms of intervention. Hence the key role played by formal subsumption which often makes use of the violent modalities of primary accumulation.

The formal moment of subsumption of labor aims at establishing the condition of possibility of capital's realization primarily on the level of relationships of production. It is a process of homogenizing and molding the material conditions of subordinated groups that happens mostly at the social level. This is the terrain where capital wisely exerts violence and despotism. In the making of the labor force, capital socializes individuals under a new form of power. Primary accumulation is incarnated also in the law of command that is continuously reinstated to check the different generations who are socialized to work. Hardt and Negri speak mostly about living-labor as if it was already formed, that is, as a hybrid creature that suffers exploitation but that is already liberating itself via biopolitics. They overlook the fact that formal subsumption directly affects labor-power and namely the capacity to work. This is the

¹¹⁷ See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://marx.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch27.htm>>.

productivity that must be socialized for capitalist use. It is the biopolitical that undergoes a process of primary accumulation.

Therefore, it might well be that there is a residue of finalism in their analysis of the progression of capital which alters a better interpretation of the biopolitical capacity of the multitude. Formal subsumption does not vanish, nor does it simply become marginal, once real subsumption is at work. As Sandro Mezzadra has argued

This is the main reason why primitive accumulation cannot be considered to be only a historical moment: it is rather to be regarded as a kind of reservoir of potential “exceptions” [...] that can be activated at any “stage” of capitalist development when the ordinary functioning of labor market appears to be interrupted.¹¹⁸

This co-presence of different strategies and tools grants a different temporality that strips away any illusion of progress. Negri describes it well in its account of the crisis of the law of value and the rising of a new rule based on command, but in the leap forward to biopolitics, this paradigm seems to lose its importance. It is in the inherent positivity of the biopolitical reign of immaterial labor that his analysis loses its grip on reality. Hardt and Negri do not mention, in fact, that the despotism that oppresses immaterial labor is very similar to the one experienced at length by women. The multitude is collectively dominated by the extraction of absolute surplus-labor just as women are dominated, as a subordinated group, under the conditions of the work of reproduction. This is where the productivity of living-labor is marked by exploitation

¹¹⁸ Mezzadra, “Living in Transition.” Mezzadra makes a similar argument against Hardt and Negri in *La Condizione Postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel pensiero globale* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2008).

and by a toxic unbearable subjection to profit and toil. Hardt and Negri never mention fatigue, stress, or exhaustion. These are terms that seem relegated to the past and to the mechanical age of Fordism, as if the pixels of a computer's monitor would not tire out the eyes of the immaterial worker, as if the flow of electronic information would not scratch his or her nerves and retinas.

If Hardt and Negri clearly identify the fall of the law of value, however, they seem to underestimate a basic fact. Wage-labor still exists, and it is indeed perceived as the very last anchor saving workers from starvation. Consequently, "labor time is the unit of measurement *in use*, but not the only one true unit of measurement."¹¹⁹ Furthermore, what Hardt and Negri define as productivity, now dispersed outside the bounds of a measurable ratio, capital simply does not take account of. This work undergoes an enormous subterranean extraction of value that is enforced through non-remuneration. Wage-labor becomes the citadel of minimal, albeit exploitative, order and commensurability. Outside there is only a never-ending hustle that is perceived as non-work, or self-valorization of one's own human capital. This reversion of what is actually exploitative into an illusion of protection and fairness immensely complicates the struggle of immaterial labor. But this is a concrete problem of survival. For if Hardt and Negri are right in bringing to the foreground the inexorable crisis of the law of value, the surpassing "of the society of labor occurs in the forms prescribed by the social system based on wage-labor," that is to say based on extraction of value.¹²⁰ In other words, when labor time is indistinguishable from non-labor time, we are not enjoying the joy of an endless, festive day, but quite the opposite. We are in fact stuck in the indefinite temporality of non-festivity. This means that the larger portion of

¹¹⁹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 101.

¹²⁰ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 101.

production falls into non-remunerative work, hidden work, which impoverishes the laborers of the multitude through and through.

It is not only everyday drudgery here that I want to point to here. As we have seen in the case of women's subjection to surplus-labor, the weakness of their position, and their dependency on the wage earner, also increased to the degree to which their work resembled a sort of *servitude*. That is to say, the obligation to work becomes unmediated, just as in servile work the servant is subsumed directly under the rule of his master. How is it possible that in an age in which production is based on knowledge and advanced technology, we see the reappearance of serfdom but only dressed up differently?

The first and most obvious answer is that, at least in Italy, the process of originary accumulation has specifically invested the few formal accomplishments of the long cycle of struggle that began with 1968. It is a restructuring imposed in order to dominate the militancy of that decade, as well as to create new conditions of profitability. Neoliberalism is in a nutshell a vast project of deregulation, which was sold to the public as the dismantling of old privileges of parasitical groups. But the erosion of a whole set of institutional safeguards instead meant the expropriation of collective forms of social relationships and organizational mechanisms that had ameliorated the conditions of exploitation. This is the most obvious point that one notices in the progressive elimination of traditional rights such as pensions, the right to health coverage, the just-cause clause that prevents indiscriminate firing. The new precarious work and their juridical definition deny these basic rights.¹²¹

The vanishing of these formal mediations exposes the new worker to perils that he or she need to face from a weak position. This point becomes more evident in the

¹²¹ See Luciano Gallino, *Il lavoro non è una merce. Contro la flessibilità* (Roma: Laterza, 2007); *Potere Precario*, spec. issue of *Posse. Politica Filosofia Moltitudini*, 1 (2006).

parallel I traced with regard to the work of reproduction, since the distortions that we encountered in that case constitute a remarkable paradigm for understanding our present condition. As I argued, in modern society women produce a vital set of services, in fact the most indispensable in capitalist terms: the reproduction of labor-power. They were considered to be non-productive agents and, for the complicated set of reasons I outlined above, were not granted equal social rights. Yet the social value of their work was truly communal, for it meant generating and preserving human capacities for the benefit of the social whole. But the social value of their product was denied and remained hidden, for the sociality they reproduced (labor-power) was registered only afterwards under the unifying network of capital which, as the buyer of labor-power, regulated any social transaction.¹²² There is a profound break between the sociality of the work of reproduction which is captured, and thus hidden, and the public sphere of production. In other words, the work of reproduction, which was already socially productive and unifying, was *disjointed* from what was instead recognized as the sole political dimension: the society that is formed around and on production. To say the least, reproduction was politically under-represented, hence the feminist and neo-feminist struggles to politicize the private.

What happens in a society based on the production of the general intellect? The march toward the politicization of the private sphere has advanced a great deal since neo-feminism discovered the biopolitical nature of the work of reproduction. Immaterial labor is now paradigmatic for production as a whole, and with it the social skills and creative knowledge-sharing mechanism we have already explored. Thus the “publicness” and commonality of work “is evoked over and over again in its role as

¹²² This point is reflected by Virno’s Thesis 4, where he states “since social cooperation precedes and exceeds the work process, post-Fordist labor is always, also, *hidden labor*. [...] Hidden labor is, in the first place, non-remunerated life, that is to say the part of human activity which, alike in every respect to the activity of labor, is not however, calculated as productive,” *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 103.

productive force.” However “it is suppressed over and over again in its role as public sphere (in the proper sense of the term), as a possible root of political Action.”¹²³ The social cooperation that is at work at the level of production magically disappears at the political level, that is to say, in the proper place of decision-making. The same holds true for the condition of women: the public nature of their work met no collective representation at a political level. This is also why feminist organizations always supported and solicited proper institutional reforms granting equal political representation.

Continuing our parallel with women’s labor, the lack of a political dimension and formal mechanisms of control that the public sphere organizes fosters a scattering of power that condenses around individual acts of force. Women had agreed-upon no formal mechanism, or once won over, they usually fell under the rule of the husband. It is here that, as Paolo Virno notices, immaterial work takes the homologous “form of universal servile work.” As in the case of the work of reproduction,

It is just [...] the very labor which produces the surplus-value [...] what takes on the appearance of servile labor. When the product is inseparable from the act of producing, this act calls into question the personhood of the one who performs the work and, above all, the relation of this personhood to that of the one who has commissioned the work or for whom it is being done.¹²⁴

¹²³ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 67.

¹²⁴ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 68.

The biopolitical ground on which the work of reproduction is carried out represents the matrix of our contemporary form of immaterial labor: it involves one's personality as a whole and, in so doing, it allows exploitation to descend to a molecular level. Consequently, it is important to sift through the negative elements of oppression and behaviors that shape the multitude before we affirm or try to accelerate its biopolitical potential. Servility is part of the common cores molding social relationships in an environment where formal mediation falls apart, and where the structural crisis pushes individuals to face scattered and regional forms of power. Hierarchies proliferate into a "thick net" of relations.¹²⁵ The parallel I draw between intellectual workers and day laborers may appear exaggerated, but the precarious ground they both traverse is structurally similar.

Sifting through Multitude's Ambiguities: Paolo Virno

Biopolitics thus represents a much more ambiguous and problematic generator of contemporary forms of life than Hardt and Negri like to imagine. There is a need to distinguish and to negate certain lines of development. This is the dialectical goal of our analysis. To do so, I want to turn to the work of an author, Paolo Virno, whom I have already occasionally cited, but whose work now, together with neo-feminist contributions, is necessary to assess at length.

Virno, in fact, investigates what he calls the "emotional situation in which the contemporary multitude finds itself."¹²⁶ He is always careful to underscore the ambiguity of the actual responses of the multitude, and in so doing he helps differentiating negative, non-productive elements from those that can be instead weathered and positively developed. Virno states that the multitude's emotionality today is characterized by "bad sentiments" which are the results of the kind of

¹²⁵ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 68.

¹²⁶ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 84.

socialization to which it is subjected. The extreme volatility and unpredictability of today's order is conducive to the development of certain attitudes such as, for example, *opportunism* and *cynicism*.¹²⁷

In a society based on the general intellect, measurability fades away in the efficacy of rules relative to specific spaces and situation, and in the ever-shifting ground of the conventional. On one side, the lack of durable patterns of behavior supports the forming of personalities that “confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of those, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another.”¹²⁸ The guiding principle for an opportunist is effectiveness, which is to say doing what is proper with regard to the rules of a specific situation. Opportunism is indeed a distinctive quality of “political action.”¹²⁹ When looking for a notion of individual survival though, opportunism becomes detrimental. Zygmunt Bauman wrote that the loss “of attachment and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything” in the life of the opportunist multitude.¹³⁰ It is a form of rapacity that is productive only in economic terms, but that produces an unstable social unity. We can argue that opportunism is the reconfiguration or response to the law of command at the individual level, for when a stable order implodes, one must make use of every opportunity at hand.

On the other hand, in a society based on the general intellect, the absence of a functioning “principle of equivalency” (such as the law of value for instance) creates the common experience of the arbitrariness of rules and their transitory nature. As a result, at a practical level this transformation requires the sharpening of opportunistic

¹²⁷ Virno explores also what he calls “idle talk and curiosity” which here I do not take into consideration, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 88-93.

¹²⁸ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 86.

¹²⁹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 87.

¹³⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 4.

instincts, while at a cognitive level it usually fosters a cynical way of relating to the world. Everyday life is manipulated (hetero-directed) in forms individuals can only partially grasp, where life becomes “nothing more than a place for immediate self-affirmation – a self-affirmation which is all the more brutal and arrogant, in short, cynical, the more it draws upon, without illusions but with perfect momentary allegiance, those same rules which characterize conventionality and mutability.”¹³¹ A general inauthentic dimension at the level of labor and social relation thus generates a cynical attitude that leads to the expression of contempt for all that exceeds the singular affirmation of the individual. It also fosters a scornful and usually blind dismissal of what is considered past and void of any real value. Grafted onto a powerful opportunistic drive, a cynical epistemology becomes a great stimulus for innovation and dynamism. But again, the cynics’ productivity feeds on the accumulation of wealth for capital, while it is a serious obstacle for grounding communality as the proper environment for the multitude. Cynics and opportunists are in the frontlines of multitude’s innovation and dynamism.

That said, we now have to reconsider the very concept of biopolitics in its relation to the multitude. Hardt and Negri equate biopolitics with living-labor and project onto biopower all the administrative and disciplinary constraints of governmental apparatuses. But from what we have said, the fabric of the multitude is much more duplicitous than what Hardt and Negri describe. The reason can be found in the way the multitude lives, works and suffers which, in turn, has to do with the biopolitical substratum, that is, the very personhood that is today put to work during the process of immaterial production. When it is the capacity to work that is subsumed by work, labor-power itself becomes productive, and as such the biopolitical comes to the foreground. As Paolo Virno says,

¹³¹ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 87.

Where something which exists only as *possibility* is sold, this something is not separable from the *living person* of the seller. The living body of the worker is the substratum of that labor-power which, in itself, has no independent existence. “Life,” pure and simple *bios*, acquires a specific importance in as much as it is the tabernacle of *dynamis*, of mere potential.¹³²

The *bios* of the multitude is linked to the transactions of capital and to the extraction of value. Bios has to be regulated, not strictly disciplined, but certainly organized by capital towards the full use and enrichment of its potentiality. The implication of this change is significant and requires a short digression. Virno argues that the biopolitical dimension of labor bears testimony to how our society has entered a phase in which the biological is fully exposed and realized via human sociality. In other words, the subsumption of bios under capitalist relationships of production taps into the “*revelation* of human nature.”¹³³ Let us elaborate this point a little further for it clarifies how the biopolitical nature of today’s labor articulates the exploitation of an anthropological trait of human nature, one that defines human mode of existence in the world.

Echoing Giorgio Agamben’s reflection on the distinction between human and animals, Virno argues that our current biopolitical mutation realizes the properly human condition of being defective but simultaneously open to the world.¹³⁴ The animal is instead absorbed by its own environment. To the extent that the animal is

¹³² Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 82.

¹³³ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 6.

¹³⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

fully integrated into a systematic immediateness of stimulus-reaction (instincts), its interaction, even in the most astonishing degree of complexity, seems to be perfectly (but also inflexibly) functional to the environment. Humans instead, do not properly live in an environment, but in a world. Their life is articulated around capacities more than instincts, for they are never organically captured in the stimulus-reaction structure of a natural setting. They confront a vast system of possibilities, a world. “Our species,” Virno argues, “has an indefinite character, that is to say it shows a lack of specialized instincts.” This lack is very dangerous, since humans are exposed to adversities without the possibility of relying on a set of procedures that have been fixated into instincts through selection. Thus in order to survive, humans too resort to the establishment of patterns and systems of protection (technical inventions and social comportments able to predict change) which delimit and define the world into “an artificial niche,” that is to say a *habitat* which grants orientation.¹³⁵

For Virno these “pseudo-environments” are typical of pre-biopolitical modes of production, where life is administered following a fixed regularity such as in a peasant society. But to the extent that Taylorism aimed at producing a *trained gorilla*, Fordist society too duplicates this fabrication of stability.¹³⁶ Now the biopolitical nature of immaterial labor has crushed this continuous reduction of the world, as a place of potentialities, to an environment, as the limited domain of actions. With “post-Fordism [...] society takes charge of the indefinite character of the human animal and exploits the absence of any determined environment.” It is here that “human nature emerges at the social level,” precisely as its potentiality is put to work to produce profit.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 6.

¹³⁶ See Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 39-40, 46-47.

¹³⁷ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 6.

Biopolitics and the Natural

Two considerations stem from this point. The first deals with the light biopolitics casts on the natural-biological dimension at play in human labor and how this gets articulated by *reductionist* and *constructivist* perspectives in contemporary debates about ecology. This argument echoes the discussion on what is natural-invariant in sexuality that I provided in chapter four. Phenomena such as reproduction have occurred unchanged since times immemorial. From the point of view of a *reductionist* perspective thus, the biopolitical substratum foregrounds a *natural* dimension that cannot be explained by concepts such as surplus-value, class struggle etc... From this perspective, it is science with its neutral set of instruments, theories and data that holds sway capturing the *bios*.

Post-modern environmentalism follow a more agnostic (but equally reductionist) philosophy, and Hardt and Negri couldn't disagree more with it. Post-modern conservationist environmentalism, for example, critiques Marxism because of its modernist assumptions in which human activity implies earth's domination, and demands "nothing less than the rejection of modernity."¹³⁸ At times, even sectors of the No-global movement adopted versions of this naturalism in hope of turning upside down the priorities of neoliberalism. Interestingly enough, in so doing, the Movement resumed the old position of the so-called "true socialists," a group of German utopian intellectuals of the mid-1840s who "predicated on the idea of reestablishing true humanity and true nature, all the while ignoring the material basis of human development."¹³⁹ These calls for a return to nature as such are, even in the best intentions, wrongly relying on a crude determinism.

¹³⁸ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology. Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000) 135.

¹³⁹ Foster, 123.

Be it on the side of a pristine nature or on that of an all-powerful science, reductionism is usually rebuked by a *subjectivist* critique which embraces a *constructivist* stance. Arguing that all that falls into human experience must be a result of human activity, constructivism maintains that even the biological is constructed and mediated socially. Negri would probably not agree with this labeling, because of his distrust of culturalist and linguistic approaches, but in his claims to be a true “Po Valley Philosopher,” one that sees no nature left untouched by human intervention, he echoes constructivism.¹⁴⁰ So where does Negri stand? Since nature was historically a disquisition for conservative elites, it was usual for *Operaismo* to mistrust ecologist movements. Campaigns to preserve the environment lacked class character and resorted to a sort of ecumenism depicting capitalists and workers together in the communal effort of preserving a liveable environment, protecting endangered species and natural reserves. *Operaismo*, but this is true also for orthodox Marxism, thus always framed environmental concerns from the viewpoint of working conditions, workers’ safety, health hazard and so on. This is probably why Hardt’s and Negri’s theory lacks a full articulation of the objective and subjective elements at play in the environmental complex. This results though, in the very scant attention dedicated to the ecological dimension as the starting point for the analysis of the conditions of subsistence for the multitude. As with constructivism, for Hardt and Negri, the danger is in fact to fall prey of a hidden form of humanism, one that erasing the natural into the humanlike forgets that the former constitutes humanity itself.

Keeping a historical perspective on the transformation of labor-power is key to keep the two dimensions (the historical and the natural) together. For when talking about biopolitics we are dealing with the reproduction of the condition of production of which human labor and nature are constituent elements. Marx noted that from the

¹⁴⁰ Negri and Casarino, 181.

point of view of capital, nature may not have value in itself, but the “creation of value is transformation of labour-power into labour,” thus “labour-power itself is energy transferred to a human organism by means of nourishing matter.”¹⁴¹ This nourishing matter is nature, the earth. Just as labor-power is obscured by the wage-labor relationship so is the natural element. The task is to unearth the relationship between production and our relation to the environment, and from there formulate environmental politics foregoing reductionist and constructivist positions.

This is the first corrective to Hardt and Negri and I will come back to it again exploring it further. The second element that stands out from our understanding of biopolitics is that the latter is not in itself liberating, since it is the “reverberation,” or the “articulation” of the “the commerce of potential as potential.”¹⁴² Biopolitics stands at the crossroad of oppression and intimations of liberation. There is no intensification here to be prompted that is not already mobilized by capital. There is instead a need of distinguishing vectors of force and behaviors that are sociologically interconnected with our ways of production. Katja Diefenbach has stated this problem in clear terms when she says that

A proto-communist multitude that has productively appropriated the tools and knowledge of cooperation only rarely becomes visible in the North and South, in the huge poverty economies, in home working and in the mass misery of self-entrepreneurship. What is revealed instead is

¹⁴¹ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, ed. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www2.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch09.htm#2a>>. John Bellamy Foster has convincingly argued that Marxist ecology can be articulated precisely from the historical relation between labor-power and the earth which gave rise to what Marx called “natural history,” see in particular chapter 5, 141-177.

¹⁴² Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 83-84.

the basis for the connection that the neo-liberal self-
entrepreneurship of poor and rich can enter into with racist,
political-religious and ethnic ideologies.¹⁴³

We need to study the harmful consequences of biopolitical control through its line of differentiation: what happens at the level of gender, what happens to migrants, what happens to what has been called the “cognitariat,” the intellectual worker?¹⁴⁴

One question that I have asked, for instance, concerns sexuality. I raised the issue of sexuality in my research of Gramsci, Pasolini and neo-feminism, because it is the site in which reproduction anticipates the biopolitical turn of contemporary production. It is within the complex interaction of sexuality that the body, as well as the living person, becomes indistinguishable from the activity performed and the value that this generates. From this analysis and critique a new praxis must emerge that activates mechanisms of liberation.¹⁴⁵ It is the formidable work of positing and articulating the difference between capital’s capturing and its socialization of the biopolitical, as well as a concrete liberating communality that remains the collective task we need to carry out.

For instance, can we keep ignoring what Pasolini said about the flexibility demanded by consumer culture and its consequences for sexuality? Do we want to ignore the logical conclusion that can now be drawn from the fact that biopolitics

¹⁴³ “New Angels. On postoperaist messianism and the good fortune of being communist,”

After1968.org,

<<http://www.after1968.org/index.php/texts/view/9#text9>>. As for the libidinal biopolitical element, one must recall also what Žižek says about necessary limitations, that is “the fact that the obstacle to our fulfilment (our finitude) is a positive condition of (a limited) fulfilment,” *Organs Without Bodies*, 187.

¹⁴⁴ Franco Berardi, “Info-Labor and Precarization,” *Generation-online*,

<<http://www.generation-online.org/t/tinfoLabour.htm>>.

¹⁴⁵ As Herbert Marcuse claimed this would entail a whole new form of life, with a “different language [...] different gestures [...] different impulses,” these new modes of being together “would be shaped by men and women who have the good conscience of being human, tender, sensuous, who are no longer ashamed of themselves,” *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

involves a process of managing the substratum of life and thus of the body in its basic drives? Finally, do we want to celebrate the strength of the body and its libidinal powers as the motor that will take us to the other side of the Empire?

It seems to me that here one can apply the same argument that Hardt and Negri use against postmodern thought, when they argue that, although precious, the work of postmodern intellectuals targeted ghosts of the past. When the empowerment of the libidinal dimension is thought of as a weapon against repression, I wonder what enemy one is here resuscitating from the depths of the past! When even the organizational solutions for the multitude embrace anti-essentialist circuits of libidinal energy as a paradigm, I wonder what benefits they bring to the re-appropriation of common spaces. 1968 did wage a just war against sexual phobias and in that moment that struggle was certainly progressive, but to the extent that a liberalization of sexual habits is now part of the new mechanism of production, I wonder who benefits from the proclamations of the political power of free libidinal circulation. Years ago, neo-feminists showed how the male fellow travelers were already taking advantage of this change. Today, certain positions of privilege (usually male's) are certainly still feeding on the valorization of free sexuality. Yet it is important to disclose how the mechanisms of immaterial production require precisely this valorization.

The instability and transient nature of a love relationship is based on the extreme volatility of our social and working order.¹⁴⁶ On one side, if individuals are human capital that needs to invest in its social value in order to remain profitable, sexuality becomes one of the conveyors of this capacity. It is not opposed to work as it was opposed in a Fordist economy, where non-labor time offered the possibility of rest and sexual pleasure outside of one's work. Now the social skills required by immaterial production are at work in the same way, whether one is selling his or her

¹⁴⁶ Bauman called it "liquid modernity," 1-4.

labor-power at a job fair as in the case when one enters a club and engages in courtship. Furthermore, the idea of sexual activity as an exchange of pleasure, from which one earns one's share and then moves on toward more profitable sources, resembles the circulation of communicability that is already employed during immaterial production. Now re-proposing models of marriage as eternal bliss, or love in itself as the purest and most natural form of human expression is simply the effect of an entertainment industry interested in selling products and relics of an ideal of life. Capital knows how to exploit the need for security that itself has created. Pseudo-environments proliferate as substitutes and simulacra of protection. The revival of traditionalist ideas of marriage and of a comfortable and secure domestic life based on property and consumption are caused by a social order besieged by insecurity and precariousness.

These practices represent the multitude's falling back on pseudo-solutions. After a long apprenticeship in keeping afloat in the sea of transience of post-modern life, one seeks refuge in the relics of the past. But these simulacra of stability are all the more dangerous because they are set up as individualist paradigms that re-propose roles and functions that restrict sociality and the capacity of the multitude to mobilize labor on the basis of equality. Moreover, a critique of sexuality based on the liberating model of the libidinal seems already outflanked. For pseudo-environments are already ruled out as the society of spectacle also projects at the same time the opposite model, that of transgression, of total freedom and enjoyment of change as the motor of self-affirmation. On the other hand, as Virno lays bare, there seems to be a need for "being sensually at ease with one's vital context," for a kind of temporality in which potentiality does not engender feebleness, but ease and amicability. But this nostalgia

for a *locus amoenus* is not a return to the past, nor is it an intensification of the mechanisms for capturing the biopolitical, but a “task” for the future.¹⁴⁷

So what is political in sexuality and what is not? What can be used to give rise to a different commonality, one in which the capture of bodies as the repository of potentiality brings together a non-exploitative sociality? I believe that sexuality must be rescued from a commercial and alienating circulation without slipping into the traditionalist discourse on monogamy. It must find a more human dimension. To be clear: I am carrying out an argument at a discursive level, which is to say at the level of the linguistic articulation of the discourse of love and emotionality and not *vis-à-vis* regulation of daily practices. Finally, I am not calling on the return of an updated model of the Fordist family. I say this because I am aware how easy it is to critique this position even at a theoretical level, accusing it of endorsing some sort of repressive, centralized nightmare of sexual administration. Yet, I believe this would be a superficial critique, one that does not take into account the problem of the capturing of the biopolitical in an age of immaterial work. Only those who coldly seek their own well-being and advantage as intellectual laborers, the cynics I mean, only they could rightfully advocate this position. But the cynics are *more royalist than the king*, for long ago they gave up a different idea of communality, when consciously or unconsciously, they decided to protect themselves from the precariousness of the world by embracing surviving, not living.

For those who have decided to live up to the hope of a different form of life, the path is no less risky. It is also a collective task, one for which the following considerations are only a small contribution. So how can we begin to untangle this political and historical knot? I want to return to Gramsci in these closing pages, to an

¹⁴⁷ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 42.

anecdote that ends a beautiful play by Maricla Boggio and Franco Cuomo that was staged in 1972, only two years before Adele Cambria's work.

Gramsci Fell Asleep

The closing scene of Boggio's and Cuomo's *Compagno Gramsci* [Comrade Gramsci] stages the dying revolutionary in his cell, together with three other prisoners. In a frenzy, Gramsci talks about the immortality of the soul in historicist terms, that is to say "as the natural surviving of our useful and necessary actions."¹⁴⁸ In one of his delirious talks, he pronounces the word *pjatilekta*. It is the Russian term for planning. One of the workers wants to know what planning means, so Gramsci proceeds to tell the story of a child and a mouse who, feeling guilty for having drunk his milk, sets out on a quest to find it. It is a laborious work that involves the construction of a whole economy to satisfy the needs of all the children and not just of his little friend. But the same worker, discouraged, complains that planning will not do much for them and laments:

When will we get out of here?

What planning could we ever come up with here in our situation?

Gramsci responds by telling another story entitled *A Men in a Ditch*. A man, who got drunk after a night out, falls into a ditch and gets stuck in there. Gramsci continues

it was very dark, his body was wedged among rocks and bushes; he was a bit frightened and he didn't move, for fear

¹⁴⁸ Maricla Boggio and Franco Cuomo, *Compagno Gramsci* (Padova: Marsilio, 1972), 156.

of falling even further. The bushes close over him, large
snails slithered over him, leaving a silvery track, (perhaps a
toad came to rest on his heart, to feel its throb because it
thought it was still alive).¹⁴⁹

Four characters pass by: a scientist, a peasant, an artist and a priest. Each of them has something to say to the man, but eventually no one helps him. Each of them is right in his own limited view. The scientist holds a purely technical truth, so all he can offer is the explanation of how gravity works; the peasant holds a moral truth, so that he angrily accuses him of having misbehaved; the artists admires the beauty of the silvery track and the wonderful piece of embroidery made by nature; finally the priest has compassion for the man and denounces the lack of charity of the people, but the only thing he offers is pray for him. Left alone, the man begins to realize how he fell into the ditch, how the bush had closed upon him, from where and how he could get out. All he needed to do was to understand “what the ditch consisted of and what to do,” Gramsci glosses.¹⁵⁰ But at this point he falls asleep.

The prisoners are left alone and begin their discussion. They follow the allegory: they are in the ditch, the party is in the ditch, and they need to explore it. But how does one translate the allegory? What is the bush and where are the walls and supports to climb up? Gramsci is asleep. One of the prisoners opens one of his notebooks and reads:

it is necessary

¹⁴⁹ I quote from the original letter to Julia, where Gramsci recalls the apologue written by Lucien Dieudonné (1870-1908), *Letters from Prison*, vol. 2, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 188.

¹⁵⁰ Boggio and Cuomo, 168.

to burn all of the past
and invent
a new life [...]
and avoid
being lead astray
by nostalgia.
But
it is also necessary
to know how to discriminate and choose,
to preserve at least
what good we had,
that which was constructive
or even only beautiful... giving attention
to the things we loved
before dismissing them
because
if we really loved something
it must have been worthwhile [...]
Getting out of the ditch
also means
casting away the toad
from one's heart.

The beauty of Boggio's and Cuomo's ending may be found in Gramsci's silence and in the suggestion of a project of liberation that grows out of it. The three prisoners are the twilight of a new community that translates Gramsci's work not into a political

doctrine, but rather into the open process of *planning* as a constituent and democratic practice. It is the idea of the immortality of the soul realized in historical terms, that is, as a necessary praxis. In this the conclusion of the play constitutes a skilful way out from the common representation of Gramsci as a pseudo-religious icon. In religious veneration, ultimately the meta-historical event of the death of the individual leads to a proliferation of an abstract cult of the person. The sacred, in fact, performs the function of explanation and compensation, but it also crystallizes everything into the repetition of acts of reverence, that is into a liturgy. The absence (death) of Gramsci is filled, instead, with the thoughts of the prisoners and their cooperation in the reading of his work. Death is not denied, but rather reformulated critically as an event that, insofar as it is necessary, it is also meaningful. We have seen this positive notion in Pasolini when we criticized its static, sacral element. Yet what is necessary in this praxis? Gramsci's response is: a critical relationship with the past, that is, with what we have loved as a task for the future.

Today the links between production and reproduction, the ambiguities that the new subjectivity registers, the biopolitical as the site of the dialectic between oppression and spaces of affirmation--all these are crucial, *necessary* points we need to articulate collectively. There are elements that we need to critique and others that can be recuperated. There is a way of casting away the toad from our heart without forgetting what was worthwhile. In general terms, I want to formulate this point as follows: the multitude must recognize what is detrimental in its own process of affirmation and what is productive. Only the very praxis of discrimination can engender a new ethic.

Thus, there is a perspective that is dramatically absent in Hardt's and Negri's study of the multitude. Negri argued that he "never believed that there could be something that could place us outside of that historical process which is capitalism,"

for he believes that nature is always “fully cultivated and fully historical.”¹⁵¹ Yet if we connect the ecological problem that Pasolini raised in the pages of *Scritti corsari* to the biopolitical dimension of labor we avoid any risk of sliding into some kind of romantic arcadia. Connecting the ecological to the biopolitical nature of labor implies two things. First, it raises the problem of the planet and the ecological catastrophe we are hastening. Now this is a fundamental issue that concerns *the planet and us*, not the earth in itself, for “the planet has billions of years ahead, and at a given point it will continue without us.”¹⁵² The problem of the earth lies in its private negotiations with its star, the sun, not with us. What is at stake here for us is relationality: among us humans, and among humans and the planet. This is what a young Karl Marx wrote when speaking, not surprisingly, about estranged labor:

the universality of man manifests itself in practice in that universality which makes the whole of nature his inorganic body, (1) as a direct means of life and (2) as the matter, the object, and the tool of his life activity. Nature is man’s inorganic body – that is to say, nature insofar as it is not the human body. Man lives from nature – i.e., nature is his body – and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it is he is not to die.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Negri and Casarino, 178, 180. Because of this Negri claims to be a true “Po Valley Philosopher,” 181. I wonder, however, to what extent the cultivated fields are also the result of the peasants’ study of the Po river and the knowledge they developed in an *organic* relationship with it.

¹⁵² Wu Ming 1, “New Italian Epic versione 2.0. Memorandum 1993-2008: narrativa, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro,” *Wumingfoundation*,

<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/WM1_saggio_sul_new_italian_epic.pdf>, 28.

¹⁵³ Marx, *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Martin Mulligan, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>>.

Marx crops out the material limit that our theories always need to maintain, for any attempt to divorce materialism from the realm of nature is in danger of falling into the essentialization of the subject. It leads to a belief in the subject's unrestrained powers, and Hardt and Negri at times seem to fall into a subjectivist depiction of the multitude. We need to "avoid a radical social constructionism that failed to consider the natural-physical conditions of existence," for this is the first limit and a very historical one I argue.¹⁵⁴ It is the historical mode of relation with the earth as a result of the transformation of our society. This is also the re-articulation of the principle absolute immanence of praxis from the point of view of natural history. In a convincing work on Marx's and Engel's ecological thought, John Bellamy Foster has investigated the natural science in coevolutionary terms arguing that

the understanding of the evolution of human beings from their primate ancestors could be explained as arising from labor, that is, from the conditions of human subsistence, and from its transformation by means of tool making, simply because it was at this level that human beings interacted with nature, as real, material, active beings who must eat, breathe, and struggle for survival.¹⁵⁵

We need to surpass a radical constructivism as well as objectivist reductionism. Our dialectical relation with the environment tells us about our pre-history as well as our contemporary history. The human dimension is one of self-transformative activity.

¹⁵⁴ Foster, 228.

¹⁵⁵ 235. Bellamy Foster also recuperates the idea of a "logic of emergence" which explains evolution from primordial times as a temporal process based on contingency and accidents which create necessary properties explaining human evolution. See 232-236.

In a Fordist society, it is the mechanic, human-like aspect that is exposed. In an age of immaterial labor, it is as if we were returning to a more natural outlook of life itself. In both ages though, extraction of value is at work.

Thus, we also need to reframe the notion of biopolitics in light of this materialist limit. It is precisely the biopolitical dimension of production that forecloses the biological and the ecological as socially marked (and not as non-human) entities. But here, as Virno argues “the direct manifestation of the biological invariant in contingent economic, social domains *shows* with precision the *terrain of political conflict*.”¹⁵⁶ When bios is subsumed as a category of social practice, the cleavage between the historical, social (human) and the natural (organic-inorganic) is redefined in light of a totally new unity. The world of humans now properly reveals that of nature. “Political theories,” Virno glosses, “give great attention to the occasions when human praxis [labor] engages in the most direct way with the sum-total of the requisites [biopolitical substratum] that renders human that praxis.”¹⁵⁷ The difference lies in the conclusions that each political theory draws.

Neoliberalism, for example, gives the lie to unrestrained productivity and consumption as absolute value. Neoliberalism is economic freedom naturalized into forms of limitless production. Neoliberalism thus mystifies our relationality with the planet by assuming the point of view of the planet itself. The non-human scale of earth’s life is thought of as our own temporality. Limits will be ruled out by technological advancements, profit-making will push society towards higher and, at the same time, sustainable standards of living. To a certain extent, Pasolini was right. In this unbounded will of the subject to incorporate and manipulate all of the real, we get a glimpse into a new form of fascism.

¹⁵⁶ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 91 [emphasis mine].

¹⁵⁷ Virno, *Scienze sociali*, 91.

The multitude has thus far revealed the natural invariant of biopolitics in contradictory ways. The cynical, opportunistic approach does not place any confidence in the neoliberal utopia. Accustomed as it is to the conventionality and transitory nature of rules, cynics scorn this revival of technological essentialism. Their awareness, though, does not lead to any action other than seizing the opportunities that one may (if s/he enjoys the benefits of a proper social niche) have at hand. Other sectors of the multitude, those who protest and challenge the authority of neoliberalism through radical opposition, deployed a concept of the earth as the absolute ontological limit. Following a Chomskian perspective, the Anti-Globalization Movement generally elaborated an idea of the biological as something inherently good and thus endowed with the natural right to establish a better society. Discarding the dead end of cynical opportunism, Virno instead argues that the multitude is right when it stresses the centrality of a biological element, as a meta-historical invariant, that is as a prominent feature in our society. It is mistaken, however, when it assumes a primitivist approach, positing the biological as the immutable ground upon which a new and righteous society can be worked out.¹⁵⁸ It is rather the biopolitical outcome of the dialectics between labor and capital that exposes the “ontological (and material) priority of the natural world.”¹⁵⁹ This is the field in which the multitude needs to act.

This said, it is true that our inorganic body is still the substratum for the biopolitical. Destroying the former means sawing off the branch on which we sit. As endless accumulation, capitalism is thus antithetical to our survival. Here I mean to say that capitalism is antithetical to the life of our organic and inorganic body. It is the toxicity of capital in itself that stands out as a point of no return. Unrestrained consumption and material growth, although a necessity for a large part of the planet

¹⁵⁸ See *Scienze sociali*, 21-23.

¹⁵⁹ John Foster 17.

living in abject poverty, must be renegotiated outside the framework of capital's accumulation. Services and immaterial work are key factors for accruing social wealth, but we must pose clear ecological limits. These limits must preserve not only the environment, the inorganic body, but also the health of our organic bodies while allowing their growth in social terms. Wage-labor and extraction of surplus-labor are still our main concern which grows in importance in a globalized and ecological dimension.

Assuming these limits means retrieving a critical form of humanism, one in which ecological limits are included in our modes of living. Priorities need to be set. The multitude needs to keep on elaborating ecologically and politically informed analysis and from these develop concrete organizational answers. Framing in a *critical* and *comprehensive* way the sets of problems we face is the most urgent task. This will involve a remarkable amount of planning. But every society has the possibility of visualizing its problems as it is able to solve them, for "the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation."¹⁶⁰ This was Marx's discovery.

The solution is obviously not one and it cannot be determined once and for all. As Pasolini knew, the outermost limit is *our* death, not simply the singular death of an individual, but our collective death, our extinction as a race. The task is then to "struggle against extinction with dignity and deferring it as much as possible."¹⁶¹ This is not a philosophy of desperation. There is much hope in it, but it is a fully human, and thus limited, mortal hope. It is the process of the historicizing of death that opens the potentialities of human capacities for the human as a limited, but socially rich

¹⁶⁰ Marx, Preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. R. Rojas, *Marxists Internet Archive*, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>>.

¹⁶¹ Wu Ming 1, 29.

communality. Who knows, while working our way out of the ditch, we might even find that Gramsci had simply fallen asleep.

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